

**The Federation of South African Women and the Black Sash:  
Constraining and contestatory discourses about women in politics,  
1954-1958**

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**Submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts, Political Studies  
University of Cape Town  
1996**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development, (HSRC, South Africa) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

Thanks to my supervisor, Professor Andre Du Toit, for his thorough, constructive criticism and encouragement of this work.

## ABSTRACT

The period 1954 to 1958 saw an unprecedented level of mobilisation and active political campaigning by women of all races in South Africa. These campaigns were split along lines of race and class, as evidenced in the demonstrations against the extension of pass laws to African women by the Federation of South African Women [FSAW] and the campaign against the Senate Bill by liberal white women of the Black Sash. What they had in common is that both groups of women organised their action into separate structures exclusive to women, with independent identities from the male-dominated structures of the Congress Alliance and of white party politics.

This separate organisation from men was not carried out with an explicit feminist agenda or a developed awareness of women's oppression, however. Nevertheless, their existence constituted a challenge to the dominant patriarchal discourse that constructed women's role as domestic and exclusive to the private sphere. Newspaper representations of the two organisations by both their political allies and their political opponents, provide evidence of this dominant discourse on "women's place" and insight on the public perception of political activity by women at the time.

Within the texts of FSAW and the Black Sash one finds tensions between accepted notions of women's primary role as wives and mothers, and an emerging self-conception of women as politically active in the public realm. To an extent, the self-representation of these texts mirrors the patriarchal representations of women found in the newspaper reports. However, there are also definite departures from the traditional formulations of womanhood that can be conceived of as "contestations" to the dominant discourse.

The patriarchal discourse was, therefore, a discursive constraint, both external and internalised, on women's ability to become active and effective in South Africa politics in the 1950s. Paradoxically, through the practical process of women's mobilisation in FSAW and the Black Sash, new space was opened on the political terrain that allowed for the alteration of the dominant discourse on women's place in society, as well as for the emergence of contestatory feminist discourses in South Africa.

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## INTRODUCTION

"When the full story of Africa's struggle for freedom is written, pride of place will go to the women who organised and struggled against South Africa's pass laws. And women will tell over and over again the story of how they went to Pretoria to protest to the Prime Minister himself... So Thursday, August 9th, 1956, blended into our history, will yet stand out as a rock, a monumental achievement by the most oppressed, suffering and downtrodden of our people - the women of South Africa." [FSAW, "Strijdom...You have struck a rock": 1956]

The 9 August 1995 was a new public holiday for South Africans who, for the first time, commemorated National Women's Day on the anniversary of the Federation of South African Women's [FSAW] historic march to the Union Buildings in 1956.

One is tempted to think of this as the FSAW pamphlet's prophecy come true. The extent of the symbolic challenge those women marchers presented to power in South Africa, however, still appears to be lost on many of today's citizens. On 8 August this year, television news asked several parliamentarians what they "planned to do for their wives" on the holiday (the celebrated one third of women MPs weren't consulted), to which one ANC MP replied that he would buy his wife roses and take her out to dinner, and another that he would make a special effort to wash the dishes on that day. In a separate instance, someone was asked whether she "enjoyed Ladies' Day yesterday?" Media images of a pat on the head for the ladies akin to Mother's Day competed to obscure the more disquieting historical image of 20 000 predominantly African, working class women mobilised against oppressive laws. Evidently, a discussion of how patriarchal

discourse constrains and shapes women's political participation is as relevant now as it is to the historical context of this dissertation: four decades ago.

In recent times, the 1950s have come to be considered a watershed decade in the history of white political domination and popular resistance in South Africa. In particular, leaders of the United Democratic Front and the labour movement in the 1980s eulogised events of mass resistance during that decade, including the Defiance Campaign and the Kliptown Congress of the People, in order to rebuild the culture of mass mobilisation that had developed prior to the banning of the African National Congress [ANC] and affiliated organisations in 1961. As a consequence, this is arguably the most familiar and well-researched period in the history of South African resistance politics.

One aspect of the politics of this decade has not been so well accounted for, this being the entry of women on an unprecedented scale into the arena of political organisation and public action. Between 1954 and 1958, two women's organisations formed and mobilised thousands of women into campaigns against the laws of the new government. The Federation of South African Women [FSAW], and the Black Sash, both developed independent identities and structures distinct from the existing, male-dominated structures of the Congress Alliance and the United Party [UP].

The coincidence of the emergence of the Federation of South African Women [FSAW] and the Black Sash, invites comparison from the angle of how and why women expressed their political aspirations in separate women's organisations in South Africa at this time. A comparative study also raises questions about the nature of these organisations and, more generally, about the gendered nature of South African politics.

Although the existing literature on the two organisations provides detailed historical accounts of FSAW and the early years of the Black Sash, there has been surprisingly little comparison drawn between the two as vehicles for women's political expression, the focus being on their separate political homes in national liberatory and liberal politics respectively. This is evident from the titles of the major works on FSAW: Cherryl Walker's Women and Resistance in South Africa [1982], and on the Black Sash: Cherry Michelman's The Black Sash of South Africa: A case study in liberalism [1975], while no published work specifically compares the two organisations.

This is not to suggest making a comparison based on a crude reading of the radical feminist notion of "universal sisterhood" that ignores differences of race, class and political positioning amongst women. On the contrary, the opportunity to fix certain variables of time and context throws into relief the differences between these organisations, their social bases and the nature of their campaigns. A 'timeline' of the most important dates in the history of each organisation is included

at the end of this chapter, and indicates how the two women's organisations developed simultaneously in time, while remaining completely separate in terms of social base and political concerns.

The timeframe of this study, 1954 - 1958, has been singled out for two reasons. Firstly, this period extends from the formation of FSAW in 1954 and the Black Sash in 1955 over the most dramatic period of campaigning and highest levels of membership, that peaked for both organisations in 1958. In the case of FSAW, the women's anti-pass campaign reached a climax in October 1958 with the mass arrests of thousands of women, but lost its momentum after the women were released on bail and the ANC took over the campaign from FSAW [Wells, 1993:122]. The year 1958 marks the end of the 'first phase' of the Black Sash, when it was an organisation that had the support of much of the English-speaking press, church, business community and women, and had a peak membership of approximately 100 000 [Michelman, 1975:59]. This support was largely for its anti-Senate Act campaign, which ended in 1956, necessitating a period of realignment for the organisation. By 1958, the Black Sash had resolved to campaign against all injustices perpetrated by the Government and from then on became a far smaller, more controversial 'anti-apartheid' organisation.

Secondly, it was during the first phase of the Black Sash's history that it maintained a firm distance from the Federation of South African Women and from multi-racial politicking in



general [Michelman, 1975:43]. The clear separation of the two organisations within 'white' parliamentary politics and extra-parliamentary 'resistance' politics respectively until 1958, allows one to test generalisations about patriachalism in South African politics in the 1950s on two distinct cases.

There are at least two levels at which the history of an organisation such as FSAW or the Black Sash can be examined. The first is the level of events or historical facts, "what actually happened", and it is at this level that historians such as Cherryl Walker, Julia Wells and Cherry Michelman reconstruct an informative account of how these organisations were formed, the kind of support bases mobilised, their agendas, strategies and campaigns, and where they fit into the broader context of South African politics. The second level is that of discourse analysis, to be explained on page 10 and in chapter 2.

When the first type of accounts are written to recover the history of women activists whose significance has been marginalised or ignored by mainstream versions of history, such work can be termed "rectifactory" history. Belinda Bozzoli defines the "rectifactory approach" as the "as yet incomplete task of rectifying the imbalance in history-writing by recovering the hidden history of women and gender relations" [Bozzoli, 1983:141].

While feminist concerns motivate the writing of rectifactory history, these accounts of FSAW and the Black Sash dispel expectations of finding a feminist agenda in the political

onwards, although the FSAW women acted forcefully and, at times, militantly against the introduction of passes for women, their arguments most often framed women in the traditional role of mothers and homemakers [Wells, 1993:1].

Historians of women's political activity in the 1950s have tended to focus on their lack of "feminist consciousness", defined as "an awareness of the systematic oppression of women coupled with a declared strategy of active struggle against this form of oppression" [Ackermann, 1990]. The concept of feminist consciousness, here, is integral to feminist theory that distinguishes between a "women's movement" and a "feminist movement" along parallel lines to the Marxist distinction between an organisation of workers (without consciousness of their oppression as workers) and an organisation of workers for workers (having an awareness of and strategy against their own oppression).

Shireen Hassim formulates the difference between a 'women's movement' and a 'feminist movement' as follows:

"A women's movement can be defined as women organising on the basis of their identities as women, in exclusively female organisations, taking up issues that they consider important. A women's movement can contain within it conservative elements that organise women from a particular social base but do not seek to question the power relations within that base, let alone within society more generally. Feminism has a direct political dimension, being not only aware of women's oppression but prepared actively to confront patriarchal power in all its manifestations." [Hassim, 1991:72]

Hassim classifies FSAW in the former category of "women's movement", arguing that the "mobilisation of women for the national liberation struggle as opposed to mobilising them for women's liberation... [had] the effect of reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal relations of domination" [Hassim, 1991:65].

Jenny Schreiner also argues that "the organisation of women into a separate organisation can't be seen as necessarily feminist" if feminism is defined as "the understanding of the specific nature of the subordination of women in order to change it" [Schreiner, 1982:2]. According to Schreiner:

"The women's organisations in the '50s were all committed to the sanctity of the family and saw women as having a crucial role as wives and mothers. They were committed to changing the position of women in so far as this would serve to make them better mothers" [Schreiner, 1982:2].

Cherryl Walker's rectifactory approach drew criticism from academics and activists when first published for "erroneously depicting the FSAW as a feminist organisation" [Walker, 1982:xxiii]. Julia Wells is one of the critics of Walker's approach of "[trying] to portray black women's resistance as a [feminist] 'women's movement'" arguing that:

"under closer scrutiny, a powerful conservative element emerges as the driving force of [this] movement. While the women effectively resisted oppression from a ruthlessly coercive state, they were at the same time defending the primacy of their roles as mothers and homemakers. Racial oppression was tackled while traditional gender-defined roles were reinforced." [Wells, 1993:1].

Walker defends her work by stating that she asks feminist questions of the history of FSAW, which "is not at all the same as imposing feminist answers on the material, in the sense of insisting on a feminist consciousness where there is not one" and she defends "the legitimacy of asking these feminist questions of the material, even if the subjects of research do not perceive themselves as feminists" [Walker, 1982:xxiv]. This is an important point, relevant to my own research which applies feminist theory to women's political organisations in the 1950s without trying to conduct a search for 'feminist consciousness'.

There is an apparent consensus in the literature that neither FSAW nor the Black Sash of the 1950s are to be considered pioneers of a feminist movement in South Africa, given their lack of feminist consciousness, and it is often assumed (Walker's work excluded) that contemporary feminist theory lacks indigenous roots in political action by women, given "the absence of a significant South African feminist movement" [Bozzoli, 1983:139]. That the issue of gender oppression was always "a bit on the side" [Beall, Hassim & Todes, 1989:30] of South African politics is a point often made by contemporary feminist intellectuals engaged in the current project of 'putting women on the agenda', apparently for the first time.

It is not my intention to refute the claim that the members of the Black Sash and FSAW lacked feminist consciousness in the sense defined above. One has only to read FSAW activist, Helen Joseph's strongly worded, "I have never really been an ardent

feminist, if indeed I have been one at all" [Tomorrow's Sun, 1966:51] to realise the futility of trying to 'discover' a certain type of political thought in an earlier generation to whom such ideas would have been unfamiliar and possibly threatening in their different social context. Indeed, it can be argued that a search for 'feminist consciousness' in organisations that existed prior to the feminist movement's development of such a concept (the 1960s and 70s) is anachronistic. The question of whether FSAW or the Black Sash in the 1950s possessed a 'feminist consciousness' or not is misleading, and does not take one very far in understanding the gender dynamics that did shape the trajectory of these organisations.

It is proposed that the gender dynamics that shaped the two organisations are not immediately evident from the conscious articulation of their members or from their overt goals and intentions. To conclude that these organisations legitimated existing patriarchal gender relations because they lacked explicit feminist consciousness is to mask the complexity of the relationship between these women's organisations and their context, and to ignore the fact that the act of women entering the political realm as an organised force in the 1950s, whether for overtly feminist reasons or not, constituted a challenge to existing gender relations.

The focus of this study is not, therefore, on the historical events per se, so much as on providing a second level of

analysis: *an examination of the ways in which the events were represented in and, in turn, shaped by discourses about women's role in politics.*

This may seem like an unnecessarily indirect route of research. However, in motivating for the use of the 'discourse' approach, this methodology provides a way of showing the existence of a struggle to define (and redefine) women's role in politics that took place between public descriptions of the activities of FSAW and the Black Sash and the self-representing texts of the two organisations. Because this struggle takes place at the level of representation, it cannot be revealed by a traditional focus on the level of events and explicit motivations. By using a more structuralist, discourse approach, this study also asserts that there is a continuity between the ambiguous and apparently conservative articulation of the 1950s 'women's organisations' and the more coherently feminist ideas of later generations of South African women, a continuity that is obscured by the conventional focus on agenda and 'consciousness'.

The idea of conducting a comparative analysis of how discourses about women operate in texts about these two South African women's organisations germinated during my reading of newspaper articles, cartoons and speeches reproduced in Mirabel Rogers' book (1956): The Black Sash. One hostile speech by a Nationalist Party MP, G.F. Froneman, was particularly striking in the language it used to denounce the Black Sash:

"If one asks the leaders of the 'Sash' Commando what their aims are, they are very vague... But whatever their aims and however lofty they are, it would be foolish to argue with them, because it is foolish to argue with any woman who makes a public spectacle of herself to achieve her aims... their actions are regarded as the silly and misguided sublimations of frustrated females... We members of the National Party have a very high regard for our womenfolk, and we certainly do not want to abuse any woman, but when women act in such a silly and undignified way, through making a public spectacle of themselves, we are bound to lose our respect for them." [in Rogers, 1956:86-87]

One does not require a subtle method of discourse analysis to pick up Froneman's technique of political defence in this speech. Instead of addressing the charge levelled at the National Party by the Black Sash: of unjust manipulation of the Constitution via the Senate Bill to disenfranchise Coloured voters, Froneman fixates instead on the fact that it is women who are making this "public spectacle of themselves". The political charge is not acknowledged at all, but dismissed by drawing heavily on common sense assumptions that women are to be treated differently from men, that they are to be treated with chivalrous respect provided they do not act or say anything in the public realm, in which case whatever they say cannot be taken seriously. His representation of the Black Sash constructs the organisation for the reader as a group of "silly", "undignified" women which reduces their aims to "vague" and "misguided sublimations" of their "frustration", one assumes, at being imperfect versions of Womanhood.

Whether this is an inaccurate portrayal of the organisation and its aims is not the point. What matters is that in order for this kind of tactic to work, there must be some commonality of underlying assumptions about women between the speaker, Froneman, and his listeners. These beliefs would need to be pervasive to the society, assumed at the level of "common sense", in order to be effective.

This point was borne out by the observation that even the most sympathetic texts about the Black Sash spoke of the organisation in terms that rest on the same systematic set of assumptions about women's proper and natural realm: the private sphere of the home. The following extracts from a letter to the liberal press speaks in laudatory rather than pejorative terms about the Black Sash, but is ultimately framed by the same patriarchal assumptions about women:

"South Africans have watched their country being torn apart by senseless hate and bitterness, and turned into a police state. It cannot all be blamed on the Nats. The overwhelming power that Ministers wield today was begun under the U.P. Men love power, and cannot be trusted with too much. And Women? Their part has always been to clean things up... When women got the vote, they were expected to clean up politics, but they didn't... They aped men, exploited their new freedom, and forgot that there is something in woman which makes her more than a mere handicapped man. They did not recognise their call to take the broom and handkerchief into public life. Now they are on the march - armed with spiritual brooms... They are going to clean things up. Brooms to the rescue!" [May Bell in Rand Daily Mail 27/2/1956]

There is an obvious tension in this text, between a militant "call to arms" for women to enter the public, political realm



and "sort things out", and the symbolic weapons the writer arms these women with: the broom and the handkerchief - traditional weapons of the housewife and mother!

Bell's imagery is not consciously intended to be conservative about women, the content of her argument shows that her intention is the opposite. However, the assumption that the natural role and talent of women is to "clean up" with actual or metaphorical brooms and handkerchiefs is common sense, it goes without saying, and operates at the level of discourse rather than of conscious articulation [Fairclough, 1989:77].

If this set of underlying 'common sense' assumptions, is formally conceptualised as "discourse", a text such as the letter by May Bell suggests that the *patriarchal discourse that "women's place is in the home and not in politics" acted as a constraint on South African women's entry into the public sphere of politics, and also moulded the identity and goals of women's organisations that did mobilise women into political campaigns.*

It is from this proposition that a comparative sample of texts representing the Black Sash and FSAW from different political perspectives, from within and without the organisations, has been collected for analysis. A discourse analysis of these texts is conducted in chapters four and five of the thesis, with the aim of (1) demonstrating the existence of a patriarchal discourse that operates at the level of common sense in both the newspapers' representations of the organisations as well as in the self-representations of the

organisations own publications; and (2) showing evidence of a tension within the self-representing texts of FSAW and the Black Sash between the 'common sense' patriarchal discourse that excludes women from politics, and emerging forms of feminist contestation to the patriarchal discourse.

The dissertation is structured into five chapters following this chapter one, introducing the topic. Chapter two takes a step back to provide a clear formulation of my methodological approach and key theoretical concepts that have already been used in an unqualified way in this introduction. Chapter three provides the context for the texts analysed in chapters four and five, by giving the historical-political background to the formation of the women's organisations in the 1950s, as well as a description of the Black Sash and FSAW from 1954-1958. Chapter four presents and analyses newspaper representations of the Black Sash, then contrasts these to the self-representation of the organisation within its own publications. Chapter five conducts a similar analysis of texts representing the Federation of South African Women and the final chapter presents my general conclusions and considers the implications of the findings of this study.

## **TIMELINE - Women in Politics 1954-1958**

**April 1954** - First National Conference of Women, held in Johannesburg, issues a Women's Charter and launches the Federation of South African Women [FSAW]

**18 May 1955** - six affluent white women meet for tea in Johannesburg and agree to organise the Women's Defence of the Constitution League, later dubbed 'The Black Sash' by the press

**25 May 1955** - 2 000 white women march to the Johannesburg City Hall. They issue a manifesto calling on all women - English and Afrikaans - to oppose the "rape of the Constitution"

**29 May 1955** - FSAW meeting in Johannesburg drafts "What Women Demand", a proposal for the Freedom Charter

**20 June 1955** - Black Sash presents a petition of 100 000 signatures of women against the Senate Act to the Governor-General

**25/26 June 1955** - FSAW women attend the Kliptown Congress of the People and make their contribution to the Freedom Charter

**28/29 June 1955** - Black Sash women hold a 48 hour vigil for the Constitution at the Union Buildings, Pretoria

**27 October 1955** - 2 000 FSAW women demonstrate against the extension of pass laws to African women, at the Union Buildings, Pretoria

**25 November 1955** - New 'packed' Senate is elected; Black Sash hold vigils outside Government buildings in the four provincial capitals, gaining extensive national and international press coverage

**12 February 1956** - A thousand mile convoy of Black Sash cars from across the country arrive in Adderley Street, Cape Town, coinciding with the opening of the joint session of parliament

**27 February 1956** - Separate Representation of Voters Bill is passed by 2/3 majority in both houses of parliament

**12 March 1956** - the Black Sash suspend all demonstrations on the constitutional issue

**March 1956** - FSAW Congress of Mothers is dominated by the issue of passes for African women and an anti-pass campaign is planned

**April 1956** - Black Sash conference in Bloemfontein; membership is now at a peak of 10 000 women; the organisation begins to look for new direction

**9 August 1956** - 20 000 women of all races (majority African) demonstrate against passes at the Union Buildings, Pretoria

**November 1956** - first violent clash of 1 000 African women protesting at pass units in Lichtenburg; police baton charge and two Africans are shot dead

- Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph are charged with treason; trial proceedings hinder their activities within FSAW in 1957

**1957** - sporadic mass demonstrations by African women against the issuing of passbooks

- the Black Sash repositions itself and works for the UP election campaign

**April 1958** - United Party is strongly defeated in the white election by the National Party. The Black Sash embarks on a new phase of opposition to all apartheid laws and institutions, in the process it loses the majority of its members

**October 1958** - pass issuing units arrive in Johannesburg

**21 - 31 October 1958** - 249 Sophiatown women are arrested while marching on the pass office; African women flock to the area demanding arrest in solidarity; approximately 2 000 women are gaoled in ten days

**November 1958** - the women are bailed out of gaol by their husbands, co-ordinated by the ANC executive; FSAW is informed that the Tvl executive will be taking full responsibility for the anti-pass campaign from then on, taking the wind out of FSAW's sails

## Chapter 2: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter, it was proposed that the significance of the women's political organisations of the 1950s to gender studies could be explored from an alternative perspective to the historical focus on feminist consciousness. The alternative perspective draws on theories of ideology, discourse and the methodology of 'discourse analysis' of texts. As an approach that theorises *the operation of power through language*, discourse analysis has gained currency across disciplines including linguistics, political studies, history, sociology and psychology in recent years [Fairclough, 1989:11].

Because the more conventional historiography used by Walker, Michelman, Wells and others in their works on FSAW and the Black Sash also relies on texts from the period, it is important to show how the discourse analytic approach to texts differs. This chapter defines and operationalises the terms 'ideology' and 'discourse', then the key feminist terms to be used, and finally states the methodological structure of the thesis indicating some of the problems and limitations encountered in its application.

## **2.1 Ideology, discourse and 'ideological discourses':**

### **2.1.1 ideology:**

The questions a feminist study (this study included) asks about the women's political organisations of the 1950s are ultimately enquiries about the nature of unequal relations of power that existed between South African men and women at that time. Unequal power relations in a particular social order, or, the domination of one category of people by another, can be manifested in more than one way. Norman Fairclough begins his study of discourse, Language and Power [1989], by drawing the distinction between two modalities of power: the exercise of power through coercion, and the exercise of power through the "manufacture of consent" [Fairclough, 1989:3-4].

While power exercised through coercion is direct and obvious to the dominated party, the manufacture of consent is a more indirect manifestation of power to which the dominated party acquiesces. This acquiescence often rests on the belief that the oppression is justified, natural or is 'just the way things are', and is characterised by a low degree awareness of the unequal power relationship on the part of those oppressed by it.

To give a pertinent example, the law that all African women should carry a passbook at all times within South Africa was a coercive law designed to give the National Party Government direct power over the movements and employment of these women. Being a coercive measure, the women affected were acutely aware

of its consequences. The mobilisation of resistance to this law was an obvious course of action to those affected by it.

By contrast, the domination of the same women by their husbands, or by the male members of the resistance movement, did not strike them as obviously oppressive. Walker comments that the struggles of women against male domination in the family and the movement were, "riddled with ambiguity. Few would have acknowledged them as 'political'. These were 'struggles without a name'" [Walker, 1982:xiv]. In this case, one could say that the exercise of power is dispersed, that it is embedded in social conventions and 'habits of mind' of both men and women, rather than being the deliberate, conscious policy of the one to control the other.

It is this dispersed form of power that concerns theorists of discourse and ideology, ideology being "the prime means of manufacturing consent" [Fairclough, 1989:4]. One should note that the terms 'ideology' and 'discourse' have their origins in different theoretical traditions, but that recent theorists, notably Norman Fairclough and John Thompson, have revised the concept of ideology to incorporate the new perspectives of discourse theory [Fairclough, 1989; 1992; Thompson, 1984; 1990].

Without delving too deeply into the history of the term 'ideology', two distinct historical conceptions can be identified. One is the Marxist, critical usage, that ideology is: "political and social beliefs that reflect narrow class interests and constitute a distorted, one-sided view of reality;

'false consciousness' as opposed to truth" [Ritter, 1986:213]. The other, adopted in the 1940s and 1950s by Mannheim's sociological following, is a looser, more neutral usage by which ideology becomes "a broad synonym for 'belief system' or 'philosophy of life'" [Ritter, 1986:215].

In Studies in the Theory of Ideology, John Thompson writes that "the concept of ideology has lost its critical edge" [Thompson, 1984:76]. He favours the earlier Marxist usage and argues that the connection between the concept of ideology and the critique of domination, or of "systematically asymmetrical relations of power", should be re-established [Thompson, 1984:76;130]. The revised definition of ideology differs from the Marxist conception on two accounts, however. Firstly, it extends the narrow Marxist focus on class domination to a critique of all forms of systematic domination, including "sexism, racism and the system of nation-states" [ibid.].

Secondly, it departs from the positivist distinction between ideology (as 'false consciousness') and truth [Thompson, 1984:130]. This second aspect of Thompson's revision of the critical conception of ideology is in line with the 'post-modern' or 'relativist' position maintained by discourse theorists, such as Foucault, who believed that: "Truth isn't outside power... Truth is a thing of this world... Each society has its regime of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" [Foucault, 1980:131].



Thompson's definition, which is compatible with Fairclough's use of the term, is stated as follows:

"...to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination." [Thompson, 1984:131]

Thompson specifies three of the ways in which ideology operates: "legitimation", "dissimulation" and "reification" [ibid.]. In other words, relations of domination may be sustained, firstly, by being represented as legitimate, in the Weberian sense of the legitimation of power on rational, 'traditional' or 'charismatic' grounds [Weber quoted in Thompson, 1984:131]. Secondly, the relations of domination may be "concealed, denied or 'blocked'" in various ways, this being dissimulation [ibid.]. Thirdly, reification, that is, "representing a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural, outside of time" sustains the relations of domination by naturalising them [ibid.].

Being able to recognise and name these three mechanisms of ideology will prove particularly useful to the analysis of the newspaper representations of the Black Sash and FSAW in chapters 4 and 5, where the aim is to reveal the operation of patriarchal ideology in these texts.

Thompson's concentration on "meaning (signification)" as the locus of ideology brings the analysis of ideology onto the level of language analysis, language being "the principal medium of the meaning which serves to sustain relations of domination" and

therefore "an instrument of power" [Thompson, 1984:131]. It is this focus on the operation of power through *language* that makes Thompson's conception of ideology compatible with theories of 'discourse'. The terms 'ideology' and 'discourse' should not be taken as synonyms, however, as will be shown once 'discourse' has been defined.

### 2.1.2 discourse:

The term 'discourse' has its intellectual roots in the Annales school of historiography developed in France between the World Wars, most notably by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch [Chartier, 1982:15]. The Annales school departed from the conventional historian's method of providing a narrative "history of events". Their aim, instead, was to study the "history of mentalities" - the enduring structures of thought within societies. Patrick Hutton distinguishes between the two historical methods as follows:

"While conventional historians dramatise individual events as landmarks of significant change, the Annales historians redirect attention to those vast, anonymous, often unseen structures which shape events by retarding innovation" [Hutton, 1982:240].

A central concept of this approach is Febvre's notion of "mental equipment", that is, the existing intellectual structures of an age that delimit the "possibilities of thought" in a given historical era [Hutton, 1982:242]. The essence of this structuralist concept is that human agents, no matter how

"intellectually adventurous", are never intellectually autonomous from the "mental equipment" available to them, from: "those environmental, institutional, and linguistic forms which set conceptual limits upon his mental universe" [Hutton, 1982:241]. These structures are conceptualised as a constraint on intellectual innovation, and a force of "inertia" on historical change [ibid.].

It is possible to misinterpret the structuralist notion of 'mental equipment' as denying the possibility of creative agency altogether, and as leading down the theoretical cul-de-sac that 'it is impossible to think of anything that has not been thought of before'. The *Annales*' focus was on the mentalities or structures of an age and emphasis on the continuity of ideas over long periods - the "longue duree" - as opposed to the conventional historian's marking of turning point events and individual thinkers.

As such, it ran the danger of presenting a static view of societies even though the formulation of 'mental equipment' as a force of 'inertia' on historical change is not incompatible with the possibility of change, and the formulation of a 'constraint' on the creative agent presumes that it is the individual agent who actually effects historical change. The point, according to Hutton, was not that it is impossible for individuals to develop new ideas outside of the range of the mental equipment of their era, but rather that, "new ideas are borne in forms which must challenge old and often binding intellectual structures, which

can thwart their acceptance or bend them into conformity with their own systems" [Hutton, 1982:242].

At times, writers in the French structuralist tradition have focused so exclusively on social structure as the principal object of analysis that the agent has been lost from view. Thompson gives the example of Althusserian Marxism as this type of structuralism [Thompson, 1984:148]. This key question of social theory: how the action of individual agents is related to the structural features of the societies of which they are part, has been refined more recently by 'post-structuralist' sociologists such as Anthony Giddens [Giddens in Thompson, 1984:148-172].

Giddens conceives of individuals as "knowledgeable agents" who are "skilful actors who know a great deal about the world in which they act" [Thompson, 1984:151]. In Giddens' theory of "structuration", action consists of intervention in the world which is initiated by agents, but is mediated by structural features of the society in which it takes place. The structural features are reconstituted by the action, often in a modified form, hence the "duality of social structures... [which] are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution" [Giddens in Thompson, 1984:152].

While discourse analysis essentially falls within the structuralist theoretical tradition, this dissertation's conception of patriarchal discourse as a constraint on the

action of women in political organisations, is informed by these more recent, dynamic conceptions of the relation between agents and the structural features of their society. The term 'constraint' is used not to denote a complete barrier to action, but rather a limiting factor on social change, according to Giddens' conception of structure as "rules and resources" [Giddens in Thompson, 1984:17], 'equipment' that enables action but at the same time mediates the form this action can take.

The work of French philosopher, Michel Foucault, built on the insights of the Annales' structuralist study of mentalities [Hutton, 1982:252]. Like the Annales historians, Foucault is interested in long-range trends and the continuity and re-use of created forms [Hutton, 1982:254-255]. These forms, which Foucault calls "discourses" can be described as "common codes of knowledge through which the world is perceived" [Hutton, 1982:252].

Discourse is an aspect of language, and differs from what one would term 'a language' (English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, etc.) in that it is a commonly held system of speaking about a specific topic of knowledge, rather than about all knowledge in general. As such, there is an "object" of discourse, and the discourse constitutes knowledge of this object.

In Fowler's Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms, discourse is defined as "a certain regularity of statements which define an object... and supply a set of concepts which can be used to analyse the object, to delimit what can and cannot be said about

law, academic institutions, etc., others provide the frameworks for constructing much broader objects of knowledge, such as the "discourses of difference" that make power-related distinctions between different types of person: men and women, the West and 'the rest', white and black, the nation and the others [Mills (1991) Discourses of Difference]. Within the logic of polarisation, the side that occupies the dominant position of power within each of these discourses is easily discernible (men, the West, whites, the Nation) and one could assert that these discourses establish and sustain the actual dominance of these groups in the societies where these discourses prevail.

The power relationship between dominator and dominated is actually embedded in the structure of the discourse. That is, the weaker party is almost always the focus, or object, of the discourse, while the subject position belongs to the powerful party. To give examples, the South African segregationist discourse of the first half of the 20th Century constructed its object as "the Native Problem", and not as, say, the "European" or the "White Problem", or even the "problem of race relations". Similarly, 19th Century debates about gender discrimination were constructed as "the Woman Question", rather than the "Man Question" or "questions of gender relations".

In both cases, the weaker party (the Native or the woman) is fixed and categorised as the object of the discourse, and as such lacks the subject position from which to speak. The dominant party (the European or the man) is not the object of

the discourse, but the discourse comes from his 'point of view', or subject position and the powerful "gaze" of the discourse is white, or male, etc.

To give another example of this type of discourse, there is a growing literature about "colonial discourse", a vast system of knowledge based on a dualism between the "West" and "the rest" which has developed during the long history of European expansion and colonisation. Beneath this umbrella construction of colonial discourse there are more particular discourses all based on the dualism between the West and other cultures, such as the discourse of "orientalism", identified by Edward Said, which constructs "the Orient" as the object of Western gaze [Said (1978) Orientalism]. Such discourses can be said to produce an 'archive' of knowledge about the object [Hall, 1992:294]. This archive of knowledge consists of images and statements constitutive of the discursive object which provide 'frames', 'schemata' or 'stereotypes' by which to fix and categorise this object.

Although the term 'stereotype' does not belong to the vocabulary of discourse theory, it is a useful term for describing certain visual images of women that appear in the newspapers and are essentially constructed by patriarchal discourses. Roger Fowler defines a stereotype as: "a socially-constructed mental pigeon-hole into which events and individuals can be sorted, thereby making such events and individuals comprehensible" [Language in the News, 1991:17].

### 2.1.3 ideological discourses:

As the discourses that construct polarities of domination and subordination between different social groups, such as men and women, bourgeoisie and proletariat, blacks and whites, it is the discourses of difference which Thompson and Fairclough regard as "ideological". The term "ideology" is therefore used more narrowly than "discourse", to denote those political discourses that sustain relations of domination. An 'ideological discourse' is therefore the discourse that sustains the power of a dominant social group, and will also be referred to as the 'dominant discourse'.

One tends to assume that a discourse that operates so hegemonically as to sustain domination of one broad category of person over another, such as men over women, or whites over blacks, would be 'heavy-handed' and obvious to that society. Norman Fairclough turns this notion on its head, however, by formulating ideology as "common sense in the service of power" [Language and Power, 1989:77]. "Common sense" consists of that which is "implicit, backgrounded, taken for granted, not things that people are consciously aware of, rarely explicitly formulated or examined or questioned" [ibid.].

A discourse is dominant when it has the consensus of a society to the extent that it is regarded as common sense. One could say in this regard that patriarchal discourses are not as dominant



in South Africa as they used to be as it is no longer taken for granted by everyone that women's natural and proper place is in the home and not in politics. It is proposed that during the period in question in this dissertation, that is, the decade of the 1950s, the discourse that "women's place is in the home, and not in politics" was considered common sense across the culturally, racially and politically divided South African society.

As Fairclough puts it, "ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible" [Fairclough, 1989:85]. It follows that evidence of the operation of an ideological discourse would not be found by looking at the conscious, explicit articulation of a political organisation and its opponents and supporters, but rather by uncovering the underlying "common sense" assumptions on which the articulation of these groups rests. The text is an artefact of both the consciously formulated ideas of the author/speaker (also called the 'intention') and of the underlying discourses that construct the way in which the author/speaker's topic can be represented.

For example, the letter written by May Bell [Rand Daily Mail 27/2/1956], mentioned in the previous chapter, is a text in which one can identify (1) May Bell's conscious intention: to mobilise women like herself to enter the public, political arena; and (2) the 'common sense' discourse that (pre)constructs women as having their natural affiliation to, and talents in the private, domestic sphere, making it impossible to discuss women

as political activists other than in terms of domestic metaphors of brooms, handkerchiefs and cleaning up after men.

By operating at the level of common sense, ideological discourses are internalised even by progressive thinkers in a society, and so constrain their articulation within the existing conservative forms, thereby having a 'dragging' effect on social change. A more precise term to describe this aspect of Bell's articulation than the 'underlying common sense assumption', is what Pecheux calls "the preconstructed" part of any utterance [Pecheux in Woods, 1977:62]. The example given by Woods is the utterance: "In view of the threat to the Free World of Soviet Imperialism, defence cuts are criminal". The preconstructed aspect of this utterance is the assumption of "the threat to the Free World of Soviet Imperialism". This is 'common sense', 'what everyone already knows', and its operation is ideological [Woods, 1977:62-63].

The bottom line of this argument about ideology is a structuralist one, that the individual (May Bell) cannot "get outside" ideology [Macdonell, 1987:38]. Using Althusserian terminology, ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects... through the mechanism of recognition, [ideology] calls individuals into place and confers on them their identity" [MacDonell, 1987:38]. Women, the subordinate objects of patriarchal discourse, are also placed in the subject position of this type of discourse, for example, when May Bell writes

about women in politics she inadvertently represents women as naturally belonging to the domestic realm.

One of the aims of this thesis is to reveal the irony of the fact that when women began to voice their political opinions in the public realm, they did so in the 'male voice' of patriarchal assumptions about women's role in society. By their action/intervention into matters of politics, the existing discursive structures on women's role acted as 'rules and resources' but in the process were reproduced in modified form.

So far, this discussion has centred on ideological discourses, those that sustain relations of domination, in this case of men over women. However, to say that patriarchal discourse about women in politics was modified when women occupied the subject position in the attempt to justify their political interventions, is to suggest that agents do not simply 'fit into' the subject position of a dominant discourse.

The critique of Althusser's structuralist notion of interpellation is that it suggests that agents are forced to identify completely with an ideology, a notion that "risks taking us out of history and makes change and revolt unthinkable" [Macdonell, 1987:39]. By contrast, discourse theorist, Michel Pecheux has argued that there are three responses available to the person interpellated as the subject of an ideological discourse [Pecheux in Woods, 1977:66]. Firstly, the individual can identify entirely with the discourse. This is "identification" by the "'good' subject

who spontaneously reflects" the subject position of the discourse [ibid.].

Secondly, there is "counter-identification", by which the "'bad' subject... adopts a position in contradiction to what she/he is given to think... but can only negate the meaning-systems common to both it and the good subject" [ibid.]. In other words, counter-identification occurs when the individual inverts the central proposition of the discourse, but relies on the justificatory structures of that discourse [Chatterjee, 1987:251].

For example, in response to the Western discourse that constructed certain forms of architecture, science and the arts as indicators of the 'civilisation' of the nation that produced them, 19th Century African and Indian nationalists rejected the notion that their own nations were 'uncivilised' by asserting that their own societies had made achievements in architecture, science and the arts similar to those venerated by the West. This is evident in an article by Pixley ka Seme (1906) that states:

"The pyramids of Egypt are structures to which the world presents nothing comparable... All the glory of Egypt belongs to Africa and her people" [Document 20, Karis & Carter, 1971:69].

While their articulation negated part of the discourse of civilisation, it did so within the justificatory structures of that very discourse [Chatterjee, 1987:255].

The third response is "disidentification" in which "the possibility of a 'new type' of knowledge production and

political practise exists" [Woods, 1977:66]. Disidentification consists of the formulation of a new discursive practise that breaks completely from the dominant discourse.

## **2.2 Patriarchal ideology in South Africa:**

Of the discourses of difference that divide societies into categories of superior and inferior, dominator and dominated, "patriarchal ideology" can be defined as that cluster of discourses that construct men and women as different and unequal, and place women in a subordinate position to men and male authority. More precisely, the term "patriarchy" means "rule by fathers" in the family and society at large (the family being the basic unit of society). The term was adapted by American feminists in the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Firestone (1972) and Eisenstein (1979), to describe a system of social organisation based on "rule by men", or "male supremacy in all its forms" [Randall, 1982:16].

The term "patriarchy" has been chosen over alternate feminist conceptualisations such as "male dominance" or "gender oppression" to reflect the centrality of the institution of the family/ private sphere to women's subordination [Randall, 1982:15-16]. The umbrella term 'patriarchy' can be misleading, however, as it implies that all women are constructed into the same position of social subordination by one universal ideology. For the women of South Africa, this is quite obviously not the case.

Belinda Bozzoli's pioneering feminist article "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies" points out that South Africa has historically contained "not one patriarchy (a radical feminist notion) but many, each connected with a particular society" [Bozzoli, 1983:149]. In the process of colonial conquest and incorporation of indigenous African societies as well as settlers from numerous societies - English, Dutch-Afrikaans, Indian, Malay - different social and cultural conceptions of women came into uneven contact forming what Bozzoli describes as a "patchwork quilt of patriarchies... a system in which forms of patriarchy are sustained, modified and even entrenched in a variety of ways depending on the internal character of the system in the first place" [Bozzoli, 1983:149].

The discourses that developed from the notions of womanhood held by different communities and modified by historical contact within South Africa have in common the subordination of the woman to patriarchal authority, and for this reason "patriarchal ideology" is used as an umbrella description of the several patriarchal discourses operating within texts about FSAW and the Black Sash in the 1950s. Legitimation of women's primary role as mother and homemaker can be regarded as a lowest common denominator of these discourses, while other aspects of the content of these patriarchal discourses is different, often even contradictory. For example, the representation of the frail, passive and decorative English "angel of the home" is at odds with that of the active, self-reliant mother-figure of

traditional African discourses, and with the nationalist political figurehead of the Afrikaner "volksmoeder" discourse [Walker, 1990:9;319; Gaitskell & Unterhalter, 1989:60-69].

In broad terms, a 'Western' patriarchal discourse had become the most pervasive of the patriarchal discourses in South Africa by the mid-Twentieth Century. This is evident in the way indigenous African discourses about women are often eclipsed by "modern" Western discourse in the representations of FSAW by the Congress Alliance and their sympathetic press. Cherryl Walker describes this dynamic between Western patriarchal notions and indigenous ones within African thought during this period:

"By the Second World War a dominant ideology of gender could be discerned at work in southern Africa. Rooted in the Western and Christian model, the concept of 'woman' was organised around domesticity, subordination to male authority, childbearing and childcare... But while a modified settler ideology could be seen as hegemonic, its authority was certainly not unchallenged. Older ideological constructs deriving from the indigenous sex-gender system were still at work within African society, particularly outside the Christianised elite." [Walker, 1990:25]

At the heart of the overarching Western patriarchal discourse that was, and arguably still is, dominant in colonial and post-colonial South Africa since the consolidation of white domination of the state, economy and society, is a tradition of Western political thought that divides society into two spheres: the public and the private realms (not to be confused with the

economic terminology of public, meaning state owned, versus privately owned business enterprises).

Feminist theorist, Jean Bethke Elshtain, has traced "public and private images in Western political thought" as far back as Aristotle and Plato, through the medieval Christian philosophers, to an analysis of the patriarchalism of the Hobbesian and Lockean liberal tradition and the social reformers such as Rousseau and Hegel. Elshtain finds a common seam running through this bedrock of Western thought which is that it is men who participate in and control the public sphere of society - its politics, business, administration - while women are confined exclusively to the domestic roles of the private sphere. Hence Elshtain's phrase, "public man, private woman", describes the position of women in Western social and political thought [Elshtain, 1981].

The literature on this topic is too extensive to do it justice here, as Carole Pateman indicates, "the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing... it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" [Pateman, 1980:118]. Suffice it for her to say that:

"underlying the doctrine of separate spheres... is the belief that women's natures are such that they are properly subject to men and that their proper place is in the private, domestic sphere. Men properly inhabit, and rule within, both spheres" [Pateman, 1980:120].



In Thompson's terms, this discourse sustains domination by dissimulation of the fact that men dominate both spheres, representing the wife and mother as "queen of the home", ruler of her own domain which may be separate, but is equally important and valuable as the man's domain.

The presentation of discursively constructed gender differences as 'natural' differences (reification) is also a common form in which patriarchal ideology operates to sustain relations of domination [Thiele, 1986:36]. One could argue that this is the most effective of the three forms (legitimation, dissimulation, reification) as it makes rational legitimation of patriarchal ideology unnecessary. For, in the words of feminist theorist, Beverly Thiele, "what is 'natural' ceases to require a social or political explanation; it is simply given, a constant which can be taken for granted" [Thiele, 1986:36].

The works of Rousseau made a major contribution to Western thought on the 'natural' differences between men and women, by having two distinct conceptions of 'natural man' and 'natural woman'. In Rousseau's social theory, male nature is derived from the original 'state of nature' and it is independent, active and the equal of all other men. Female nature, however, has nothing to do with the original 'state of nature', but is defined rather by her role in,

"the golden age of the patriarchal family; and she is therefore dependent, subordinate and naturally imbued with... qualities of shame and modesty... female nature... fits her only for a narrow domestic role" [Thiele, 1986:37].

The system of ideas about women dominant in South Africa in the 1950s will be referred to as the discourse of "public man, private woman". Although more specific and variant patriarchal discourses operate to construct and constrain the political action of the Black Sash and FSAW, it is ultimately this discourse against which these organisations, by exclusively mobilising women to take on the government in the public sphere, are at odds. To operationalise the discourse, it will be identified by statements within the texts that legitimate the idea that: "women's place is in the home, and not in politics".

Apart from the broad Western discourse of public man/ private woman that operates to varying degrees within all of the texts to do with the Black Sash and FSAW, one can identify a more nuanced patriarchal discourse at work within the texts of the English-language press, as well as in the self-representations of the Black Sash. The striking features of this discourse are its association of women with the "moral" rather than the political, its emphasis on women's natural/ biological distinctions from men that make them physically frail and therefore unsuited to the rigours of public life, but also possessing superior "moral intuition" to men that makes their instinctive feelings about social issues worthy of men's attention. Middle-class women are idealised as the "moral guardians" of society, but always from the position of the

passive "angel of the home" in this "discourse of femininity" [Poovey, 1984:X].

An awareness of the gender systems of precolonial Bantu-speaking societies is important to the analysis of the discourse of "motherhood" which features in the FSAW texts. For, although Western patriarchal ideology was dominant in South Africa by the 1950s, Walker states that:

"Ideological currents from the indigenous sex-gender system continued to flow through African society in complex ways, even as relations between the sexes in colonial society were being restructured by the economic imperatives and values of a market-orientated, increasingly industrialised and urbanised society" [Walker, 1990:2]

Jeff Guy gives a broad account of "Gender Oppression in Precapitalist Societies" [Walker, 1990:33-47]. He argues that patriarchal domination was not merely an aspect of these societies, but their, "central dynamic - the appropriation and control of women's productive and reproductive capacity by men was the axis on which these societies turned" [Walker, 1990:7].

The nature of this domination was "double-sided", however, for in a society in which "the accumulation of people, rather than things... [is] of paramount importance", women derived a degree of social status from their reproductive capacity [ibid.]. Guy adds that, "the fact that value was created by fertility gave women a significant role in society, not only as the objects of exploitation, but as bearers of value" [Walker, 1990:46].

The African discourse that constructed women as 'mothers' therefore differed from the Western constructions of motherhood bound up in the discourses of the 'moral guardian' and 'angel of the home'. The social status of African women was generally undermined by the encounter with colonial gender assumptions which "did not recognise women as productive members of society" [Walker, 1990:9].

That the discourse of 'public man/ private woman' had been assimilated into urban African culture by the 1950s is confirmed in the pages of Drum magazine, the immensely popular tabloid of this era that was aimed at an urban black readership. A set of pictures with an extended caption titled, "And She's only a Housewife", published in September 1958 provides a prototypical example of this patriarchal discourse.

The main photograph is a "Madonna and child" study of a woman, seated, holding her baby and gazing down at her other child. The second photograph is of the woman sweeping the steps of her house with a short, hand-held brush in a stooped position. The caption frames the pictures as a "tribute" to the housewife, "the Darlings of the Kitchen", while positioning the readers as "Admiring men, grateful men". The idealisation of the 'mother/housewife' role for women, and the separation between the female domestic sphere and the male domain of politics, appears with textbook clarity in the following extracts:

"She's a wonderful creature, the housewife. She gets more than her fair share of the troubles of this raw deal called modern life. And how she can take it!

"She's never been in the limelight before. Probably never will be again... Her life is too full for her to worry much about it, or about things like the next move of the Big Four. She's got her own Little Three and it's their next move which is her biggest concern. With all the mothers like her, she is doing one of the most important jobs we know.

"Mrs Constance Nkauta! She's no politician, no graduate... just a common or garden housewife, who works seven days a week unhonoured and ungrumbling." [Drum September 1958: 55]

It is this discursive construction of the ideal African woman that framed the lives of the women who became active in the Federation of South African Women in the 1950s. The effect it had on the African women's self-understanding of their political objectives and of their organisation is the subject of Chapter 5.

## **2.3 Notes on Methodology:**

The methodology of critical discourse analysis involves making explicit the implicit operation of constitutive discourses within texts. It should be noted that a 'text' here refers not only to written representation, but also to spoken articulation, visual representation and even forms of practise [Macdonell, 1987:4].

Because the analysis is of discourses operating within a specific time period in the past (1954-1958), the core data collected consists of written and visual texts in the form of newspaper reports, editorials and political cartoons,

transcribed speeches, as well as pamphlets, articles and unpublished documents produced by and about FSAW and the Black Sash. There is one example of a form of practise by the Black Sash operating like a 'text', which is discussed in chapter 4. This is the Black Sash women's practise of "haunting" Nationalist Party ministers with silent protests. This practise was discursive in its subversion of the patriarchal discourse that constructs women as silent on political matters.

Retrospective accounts including interviews and autobiographical material are deliberately left out of the data for analysis because they are likely to have been influenced by shifts in discourse after 1958 that would invalidate historical observations about discourse in these texts. This type of material is used to provide a background or secondary corroboration of what the self-understanding of members of the two organisations was.

After collecting a wide sample of available texts about FSAW and the Black Sash produced between 1954 and 1958, the material was sorted into three categories: (1) self-representation of the organisations by themselves (members); (2) representation of them by their political allies - the liberal English press in the case of the Black Sash and publications and individuals sympathetic to the Congress Alliance or representing the 'African viewpoint' (such as Drum, New Era, Fighting Talk) in the case of FSAW; and (3) representation of them by their political opponents, namely their hostile press - NP supporting

papers like Die Vaderland and Die Transvaler for the Black Sash and both Afrikaans- and English-language commercial papers that were openly hostile, suspicious or simply dismissive of FSAW.

This is done in order to investigate whether and how the organisations are represented differently by each of these different perspectives, and particularly whether there is a marked difference between the way in which the women of the organisations understand and represent themselves vs. how they are perceived from the outside, by their political opponents and allies who both happen to be men.

The main practical problem encountered by this project is that, on the one hand, the operation of discourses within a text is best demonstrated by a detailed micro-analysis of the text as a whole (one could write an essay on the operation of discourse within just one of these texts). On the other hand, in order to validate the proposition that patriarchal discourses are pervasive and dominant in political texts of South Africa in the 1950s one has to provide comparative evidence from a large sample of texts.

The method of discourse analysis used in this project therefore consists of two parts, the first being the identification of underlying themes or discursive features that recur within a sufficient number of texts in a category, such as the category of representations of FSAW by the white commercial press, to justify generalisations about the operation of these discourses within the category of text in question. Secondly, a

smaller number of exemplary texts will be analysed in greater detail in order to show the more complex workings of discourse within individual texts.



## **CHAPTER 3: WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS -**

### **CONTEXT**

Following Thompson's methodology for interpretation of ideology, defined as the "ways in which meaning serves to sustain relations of domination", the first stage prior to the analysis of the operation of discourses within texts, is to reconstruct the context in which such discursive production took place. While it is within texts that we will have to find evidence of ideological discourses at work, Thompson argues that, "our interpretation of a [text] may be profoundly affected by an inquiry into the social-historical conditions of its production" [Thompson, 1984:134]. Therefore, although it was stated in the introduction that this is not merely an historical study of FSAW and the Black Sash, the historical contextualisation of the texts forms a necessary stage in their interpretation.

The need to be brief means that a description of the changing socio-economic (material) position of South African women up to the 1950s, used by Walker and Wells to explain the political actions of the different groups of women, has been omitted. Instead, this chapter gives an account of the historical background and a narrative of the founding of the two organisations. The material explanation for women's political expression is less appropriate to this study of the domination

of women on the symbolic level of discursive practises, than it is to the social historians' approach. Context, in this case, is taken to mean historical and political context rather than the social context in which the texts were produced.

### **3.1 Fundamental Divisions within South African Politics:**

The distinction between the social base of the membership of the Black Sash and of the Federation of South African Women reflects a more complex political cleavage than a simple division between white and black. While race was the determining factor of inclusion into or exclusion from the limited parliamentary system in South Africa, the factors of class and ethnicity separated all South African women, including those of the two organisations. Ultimately, the organisations belonged on the opposite sides of the South African political fence: the Black Sash operated within the context of "white politics" that took place in the domain of parliament, elections and party competition between major players, the National Party and the United Party; and FSAW was situated in what can be broadly termed the "politics of resistance" against the system of white minority political and economic domination. This chapter briefly outlines these two distinct political contexts relevant to the Black Sash and FSAW respectively, then describes the history of each organisation within the period 1954 to 1958. While there is not space for a full account of the position and activities of

women in South African politics before the 1950s, the details most relevant to this study are mentioned in this chapter.

### **White Politics:**

The origins of the Black Sash as a political movement lie in the central narrative of white politics in the first half of the 20th century: namely, the ideological clash between white supremacist Afrikaner Nationalism, essentially a twentieth century movement, and the remnants of the nineteenth century Liberal tradition.

A diverse tradition, liberalism was nevertheless strongest within English-speaking society in the Cape Colony, where a century of British law and administration had established principles of "equal justice" before the law and "equal rights for all civilised men" which amounted to a qualified non-racial franchise and allowing limited parliamentary representation for Africans in the Cape Colony [Davenport in Butler et al, 1987:21-34]. Strong links had also developed between mission Christianity and liberalism in the Cape, which infused the liberal tradition with a moral, humanitarian discourse [Elphick in Butler et al, 1987:65]. The notably moralistic tone of the Black Sash protests as well as the value it placed on constitutionalism and the rule of law are indicative of its location within this tradition.

The Act of Union (1910), that united the British Cape Colony and Natal with the former Boer Republics that had been defeated

in the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) under a single South African Constitution, involved a compromise of these liberal principles in order to appease the Transvaal and Orange Free State by limiting the non-racial franchise to the Cape and further eroding African representation in this province [Michelman, 1975:26].

There were two issues that continued to dominate white parliamentary politics after Union: the tension between English and Afrikaner, and the "Native question" of how best to incorporate the black majority as an unskilled labour force without losing political control of the country. The compromise on the non-racial franchise had satisfied neither the liberals nor the Afrikaner Nationalists.

Founded in 1914, the National Party [NP] advocated twin goals of gaining an Afrikaner republic and removing the residues of black franchise rights in the parliamentary domain. Ironically, the granting of women's suffrage in 1930 was used by the NP as one of its strategies to dilute the effectiveness of African and Cape Coloured voters, when the Hertzog government gave the vote to white women only [Michelman, 1975:26].

Apart from a small number of staunch liberals and communists, the attitude towards the "Native question" amongst the English-speaking constituency was ambivalent [Michelman, 1975:29]. A paternalistic discourse that shared with Afrikaner nationalism many of the assumptions and practises of white supremacy, but at the same time invoked the Cape liberal values of trusteeship and

equal justice for all races, is evident in the piecemeal segregationist policies followed by the Smuts government until the end of the Second World War. The ideology of "trusteeship" justified segregation on the paternalistic premise that separate institutions for the 'natives' would be in their best interests, while their inevitable 'progress' and 'civilisation' allowed for their eventual incorporation into (white) South African society on an equal basis with whites [Hoernle, 1939:57-69].

The second crisis for liberalism came in 1936 with the implementation of the Native Representation Act that removed African voters entirely from the common voter's roll in the Cape and replaced their direct representation with four white 'Native representatives' in parliament.

The passing of the "Hertzog Bills" was a moment of crisis for many liberals, including liberal academic, Alfred Hoernle, whose Phelps-Stokes lectures delivered in 1939 grappled with the problem of reconciling liberal principles with the problems of South African race relations [Hoernle (1939) South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit]. In general though, the English-speaking public remained complacent in their faith that "trusteeship" was a just native policy [Michelman, 1975:28]. English-speaking voters were taken by surprise, however, when the Nationalist Party came to power without a majority of overall votes in 1948, and were dismayed when this position was consolidated in the election of 1953.

In the first three years of Nationalist rule, the opposition (UP) conceded to the introduction of several apartheid laws, and supported the Suppression of Communism Act and the widening of police powers. The UP attitude of "give the government a chance" changed in 1951, however, when the NP introduced the Separate Representation of Voters Bill, designed to remove what was left of the Coloured franchise in the Cape which remained as an entrenched constitutional right [Michelman, 1975:30].

When the Bill was passed (1951) by simple majorities in both Houses of Parliament the NP declared it to be law. The opposition contested this as unconstitutional without the two-thirds majority required to change an entrenched clause of the 1910 Constitution. On appeal, the law was declared invalid by the Court of Appeal. The NP then attacked the power of the courts by introducing the High Court of Parliament Bill in 1952, aimed at achieving "parliamentary sovereignty" from the Constitution and from the judiciary.

In the same year, the Cape Supreme Court dismissed this High Court of Parliament Bill as invalid and its decision was upheld by the Appellate Division. At this point, many in the United Party perceived the National Party to be attacking one of the fundamental tenets of democracy - the separation of powers - in order to impose the NP's political will. On this view the issue went beyond the preservation of the Cape Coloured franchise to the preservation of the democratic system (at least as far as white politics extended).

After an overwhelming victory in the election of 1953, the National Party re-submitted the Separate Representation of Voters Bill to a joint sitting of both houses of parliament. Again, it failed to achieve a two-thirds majority, being blocked by the Senate. The NP targeted the Senate and the Appellate Court as the two bodies that stood in the way of the bill becoming law, and in 1955 two acts were passed: the Senate Act and the Appellate Division Quorum Act, designed to pack both institutions with NP supporters. Via the Appellate Division Quorum Act, the Appellate Court was enlarged to eleven members, while the Senate Act practically doubled the Senate from forty-eight to eighty-nine members, seventy-seven of whom were now NP supporters [Michelman, 1975:32].

It was at this stage that the opposition public became angered by this assault on constitutionalism or, "the decisive measure which takes away from the electorate the essential power that distinguishes democracy from dictatorship" [Professor Keppel Jones quoted in Michelman, 1975:32]. In effect, they were finally forced to acknowledge that segregation was not a temporary suspension of equal incorporation under trusteeship, but a policy meant to exclude blacks from political representation permanently. This disillusionment is indicated in a speech by Hoernle's widow, Mrs Winifred Hoernle at the first public protest meeting (25 May 1955) attended by the Black Sash:

"We have believed that we were living in a country where democratic rights were secured at least to the White people of the country and to some of the non-Europeans in the Cape

Province. Many of us still hope that the basis of our franchise will be broadened until we can really claim the title of a democracy honouring the highest moral ideals of Western civilisation... in the original Constitution the Coloured people and the Africans in the Cape Colony had the same voting rights as the Europeans. Today these rights have been diminished." [Rogers, 1956:18-19]

Although the United Party recognised the threat the Senate Act held to constitutional government and particularly to the power of opposition parties, it hesitated to act on the issue as it feared losing more votes among whites by taking a strong stand against Coloured disenfranchisement. The party's reaction therefore lagged behind public opinion among its liberal support base, who felt that a fundamental constitutional principle was at stake that went beyond party political considerations. This opinion is conveyed by a statement issued by 31 professors at Rhodes University in May 1955, that, "This is not merely a party issue, but one which concerns the conscience of the nation" [Rogers, 1956:15]. It was out of this new public awareness of a political threat to democracy, combined with frustration at the apathy of the United Party, that the Black Sash was formed in May 1955 as an extra-parliamentary protest movement.

### **Resistance Politics:**

The pattern of black politics in South Africa after the Act of Union was one of diminishing formal representation within the parliamentary domain and eventually of a shift to mass-based



organisation of resistance to this racially exclusive political system. Hopes, that the non-racial Cape franchise would be extended to the defeated Boer Republics, were dispelled by the 'compromise of Union'. As a result, in 1912 an assembly of the African elite: ministers of religion, teachers, chieftains, businessmen, journalists - all men - founded the South African Native National Congress to campaign for African representation on a national level [Lodge, 1983:1].

The ANC's early profile was one of a small, mission-educated body with a commitment to political incorporation and constitutional means of protest, usually by petitioning parliament with 'lists of grievances'. Its significance within black politics was eclipsed in the 1920s by the brief rise of the Industrial Commercial Union [ICU], that succeeded in the mass mobilisation of African workers in urban and rural areas, most significantly in Cape Town and Durban, rural Natal and the Eastern Transvaal [Lodge, 1983:5].

By 1927, the ICU had reached a peak membership of 100 000 under the charismatic leadership of Clements Kadalie. Although the organisation collapsed shortly thereafter, Lodge comments that the ICU had the lasting effect of transforming the "courtly and often pompous discourse of African politicians [with] a fierce anger and apocalyptic imagery" [Lodge, 1983:6]. For a brief period between 1927 and 1930, the ANC adopted a more radical strategy, including recruitment drives for mass

membership, under the presidency of Josiah Gomele [Lodge, 1983:8].

Although it was not long before the more moderate and conservative leadership of the ANC re-established control of the organisation, an important outcome of this period was the cementing of an enduring alliance with the Communist Party [CPSA, later the SACP]. The CPSA had focused on the demands of the white working class until 1928, when it took up a new campaign for "an independent South African native republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' government" [Walker, 1982: 45]. A progressive, non-racial discourse developed within the Communist Party during the 1930s and '40s and this informed the political approach of white activists who became part of the Congress Alliance after the CPSA was banned in 1950.

The Native Representation Act of 1936 was a turning point for some in the ANC, indicating the futility of their appeals for further incorporation into the parliamentary system as educated, "civilised" Africans. Nevertheless, Lodge comments that the Hertzog legislation "did not provoke a dramatic response from African politicians", despite the formation of the All-African Convention [AAC] to unite African opposition to the new institutions, including the advisory Native Representative Council which Hertzog introduced as a quid pro quo for the loss of African franchise rights on the common roll in the Cape [Lodge, 1983:11]. As a body, the AAC was dominated by

conservatives, many of whom refused to boycott the new separate institutions [ibid.].

Two developments in the 1940s changed the nature of the ANC: the emergence of the Congress Youth League [ANCYL] and the strengthening of the relationship between the Communist Party and the ANC [Lodge, 1983:20]. The Youth League, formally recognised by the 'old guard' in 1943, was produced by an Africanist discourse that involved a racial analysis of the political struggle and emphasised the need for united, mass confrontation by Africans for the goal of 'national freedom' [Lodge, 1983:22]. This is reflected in the Congress Youth League Manifesto of 1944 and the ANCYL "Programme of Action" for the ANC, adopted in 1949, that called for boycotts, strikes and other forms of civil disobedience to be used in the struggle for national freedom, political independence and the rejection of all forms of segregation [Karis and Carter, 1973: 300-308].

Despite the adoption of the Programme of Action in 1949, and the prominence of youth leaders such as Mandela and Sisulu in the ANC, the Africanist discourse did not become the dominant tendency in the ANC. Instead there emerged a multi-racial Congress Alliance with white communists, the Indian Congress and smaller trade union and political organisations, which Lodge attributes to the political pragmatism of other ANC leaders, such as President Xuma (1940-1949) [Lodge, 1983:25].

The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 dissolved the CPSA, and left its activists to become fully absorbed in the affairs

of the ANC [Lodge, 1983:36-37]. The multi-racial alliance that emerged out of the Defiance Campaign established the characteristic non-racial discourse of the Congress Alliance in the 1950s, and caused a rift with the Africanist faction of the Youth League.

During the Defiance Campaign, launched in 1952, an initial eight and a half thousand volunteers began to defy discriminatory legislation by entering whites-only post offices and trains and ignoring permit regulations restricting entrance to African townships [Walker, 1982:87]. At the height of the campaign in September 1952, mass involvement is indicated by the figure of 2500 arrests being made in 24 places around the country that month [Lodge, 1983:44].

It was out of the mass-mobilised, multi-racial political context of the Defiance Campaign and formation of the Congress Alliance that the Federation of South African Women took shape in 1954.

### **3.2 The Black Sash within White Politics:**

It was the white liberal voters' mood of frustration at the inability of the UP as their political party to stand up to the NP's assault on constitutional government that six Johannesburg women expressed at a tea party on 19 May 1955. Ruth Foley voiced the group's feelings about the passing of the Senate Act and the Appellate Division Quorum Act as: "We can't sit still and do

nothing - I don't know what we can do, but we must do it. We must act. There must be thousands like us and we must get together" [Rogers, 1956:14]. A mere six days later, two thousand like-minded women marched to a Senate Bill protest meeting in the Johannesburg City Hall, "bearing banners, to the beat of a muffled drum" and with a manifesto stating:

"The time has come for the Government to listen to the voice of the women of this country... As women we intend to bring this Government to its senses. We therefore call on all women, English- or Afrikaans-speaking, to join us in this march. Let all women who value liberty and freedom heed this call to action." [Rogers, 1956:16]

The irony of this call to "all women", that is "all [white] women", given that the Black Sash restricted membership to white women until the 1960s and cold-shouldered FSAW on several occasions, is testimony to the depth of the racial division between South African women at the time. The spontaneity and urgency with which women from this social sector responded to the Senate Bill issue is, nevertheless, astonishing. In its first heady year of existence, the Women's Defence of the Constitution League mobilised thousands of women against the Senate Act and became well known in the press - who gave it the shortened name of the Black Sash - after the sashes worn as symbols of mourning for the 'death' of the Constitution. But, its campaign remained confined to the arena of white politics and never made contact with the parallel protests by other women in FSAW at this time.

The only precedent for organised political action by this social group of women was the Women's Suffrage Campaign that culminated in Prime Minister Hertzog granting the franchise to white women in 1930. Much reference was made by the press and the Sash women themselves to similarities with the earlier women's suffrage campaign, although as Mirabel Rogers pointed out, "In the field of politics, once they had secured the right to vote, many women continued as a matter of course to vote as their husbands voted". She adds further that for most of these women independent political action such as the Black Sash campaign of 1955 was a first, for:

"they had seldom thought for themselves outside their own limited domestic spheres. And, although in the years intervening [since gaining the vote], with the war and the increased need... for the work of women, they had learned a measure of independence... not all by any means had divorced themselves from the old 'goods and chattel' tradition, fostered by possessive husbands and nurtured in many cases by the marriage laws." [Rogers, 1956:25]

Although some of the women at the original tea party were already involved in liberal politics, it is not obvious why the network of affluent and sheltered housewives they contacted should respond so enthusiastically to what was after all a legislative change to the political system which they themselves admitted to knowing very little about. Their response certainly had more to do with a perceived threat to the Constitution and to constitutional politics and hence to the political interests

of English-speaking voters than it did with the interests of Coloured voters. One of the founding leaders, Jean Sinclair, admitted her own political ignorance and indifference when the Natives Act was passed in 1936:

"...as a young housewife immersed in domestic concerns, she had been unaware of any great moral or political significance in the native bills. She observed that her attitude had been common to the community of which she was part; that women had been stirred... over the vote for women; but that politics, in general, were not of any real concern to them." [Michelman, 1975:28]

In a presidential address given in 1975, Sinclair stated that "many members were less concerned about Coloured voting rights than they were about the violation of the constitution" [Sash, May 1975]. This confirms Michelman's argument that the political naivety of this group of women led them to campaign in an "exalted tone" for the principles of justice and democracy by defending historic institutions which "on inspection, proved to be something less than bastions of freedom". Although the organisation was later able to shed some of this naivete through political experience and education, their initial campaign against the "rape of the Constitution" was less of a liberal stand against apartheid than a defence of the status quo [Michelman, 1975:29].

The Senate Act issue of 1955 posed a direct threat to the rights of white liberals themselves, as the official Opposition whose powers were eroded by the Act, unlike the Hertzog Bills of 1936 which had threatened the political rights of Africans only.

This certainly explains why the constitutional issue of 1955 sparked off a great deal more moral indignation among the English-speaking, liberals than the issue of 1936. However, it does not account for why women in particular were suddenly so interested in politics, when in 1936, according to Sinclair, they remained too preoccupied with domestic concerns to care.

The amount of excitement and enthusiasm generated by the campaign, that comes across in Mirabel Rogers' book written in 1956 and in the memoirs of founding member, Dorethy Hacking [1994], seems to go beyond the level of political awareness the members had at this stage. A columnist of The Argus (a Cape Town English-medium, liberal newspaper) painted a cynical portrait of the Sash member who drove a car with a model of the Constitution on it in a motorcade against the Senate Bill:

"What Jessie knows of politics you could write on the number plate of that cranky jalopy of hers... And Jessie is a fair sample of the general run of Sash women. If Smuts and Botha had tinkered with the Constitution or had any manipulation been done by Rhodes or Merriman, Jessie still would have been working for the Constitution and for security. Let us not bluff ourselves - she is enjoying every day of it." [The Argus, 13/2/1956]

Just as evident in the texts of the Black Sash in this early phase, however, is the sincere wish to become informed and involved in politics. Beneath the passionate campaign to uphold democratic principles ran a subtext of a leisured class of women finding an entrance into a domain from which they were usually excluded. It is proposed that the arrival of an important



political issue at a moment when liberal party politics was demotivated and in disarray, provided the opportunity for women to enter the political arena on a significant scale. Taking this opportunity was never a conscious goal of these women, but the exhilaration of women entering what was previously a male domain was manifested in the discourse evident in the texts of the organisation. For example, the opening lines of the Black Sash manifesto of 1955 mention neither the Senate Bill, the Coloured franchise, nor the exalted Constitution of 1910, but rather state that "it is time for the Government to listen to the voice of the women of this country" and for (white) women to "heed this call to action" [ibid].

The Women's Defence of the Constitution League grew exponentially in the year of 1955, to a membership of 10 000 women by the time the new 'packed' Senate passed the Separate Representation of Voters Act in March 1956 [Michelman, 1975:59]. Membership dropped away just as quickly, however, when the Black Sash ended the narrowly-focused campaign around which the organisation had been conceived, and faced the challenge of either disbanding or transforming itself into an organisation with firmer principles and lasting goals.

The years 1956-1958 were a period of self-assessment, and in the process, political education for the members who were to form the remaining core of the Black Sash. To give an example, Black Sash president, Jean Sinclair, identified this period as the time when her search for new scope for the organisation

increased her understanding of the political dynamics of the time and directly informed the development of her anti-apartheid stance [Michelman, 1975:60]. By the time the election of 1958 confirmed the dominance of the Nationalist Party for the foreseeable future, the Black Sash had decided to take the strong anti-apartheid and human rights stance that has characterised the smaller, but more radical, organisation ever since.

### **3.3 The FSAW within Resistance Politics:**

The Federation of South African Women was founded in 1954 with the deliberate intention of providing a formal, unified structure for women's participation in resistance politics. That women were excluded from membership of the ANC until the recognition of the ANC Women's League in 1943, reflects the marginalised position women occupied within the structures of resistance organisations generally. However, as Jenny Schreiner points out, there is a distinction between the exclusion of women from "institutional political channels" and political inactivity [Schreiner, 1982:1].

African women never entirely passively accepted oppression, but repeatedly expressed themselves in "grassroots" local campaigns over issues such as food prices, housing and legislation that affected them directly [Walker, 1982:75]. Walker argues that, "in many townships there is a long tradition

of female protest that becomes reactivated in times of crisis" [ibid.], a tradition formed in part by the successful anti-pass protests in Bloemfontein, 1913, and Potchefstroom, 1930 [Wells, 1993:2-3]. The precedent of these political protests against passes by African women set a precedent for FSAW similar to that of the Suffrage Campaign for the white women of the Black Sash.

The women's passive resistance campaign against passes in 1913 is an example of women protesting independently despite exclusion from male-dominated, formal political structures. Although passes for women had been a volatile issue in the Orange Free State since the 1890s, women at the founding conference of the SANNC at Bloemfontein in 1912 served as caterers and hostesses, but not as participants [Wells, 1993:39]. After numerous legal appeals, including petitions and an all-female delegation to Cape Town, were ignored, the women of Waaihoek location near Bloemfontein came out in open defiance on the 6 June 1913 with the rallying statement, "We have done with pleading, we now demand" [Walker, 1982:31].

During the 1930s and 1940s, black trade unions and the Communist Party [CPSA] politicised the growing female workforce, particularly in the clothing and food industries. From the ranks of the CPSA, the Garment Workers Union in the Transvaal and the Food and Canning Workers Union in the Cape, emerged several capable women leaders including Ray Alexander, Hilda Watts, Josie Palmer and Dora Tamana. At a meeting in 1947, CPSA women in Johannesburg resolved to establish a non-racial women's

organisation - known as the Transvaal All-Women's Union - which was a small, localised prototype of FSAW [Walker, 1982:102].

In its attempt to build up mass membership in the 1940s, the ANC leadership identified women as a previously neglected constituency [Walker, 1982:88]. Accordingly, at the 1943 annual conference women were granted full membership status and the right to vote and participate in Congress affairs. The ANC Women's League [ANCWL] was established, therefore, in the same year as was the Congress Youth League, with a similar task of reaching a specific sector:

"to arouse the interest of African women in the struggle for freedom and equality and assist the widespread organisation of women; [and] to take up special problems and issues affecting women" ["Rules and regulations of the ANC Women's League" in Walker, 1982:89].

The ANCWL was slow to get off the ground, however, and it was not until Ida Mtwana became president of the League in 1949 that it became an active force within the ANC, particularly by becoming involved in the Defiance Campaign [Walker, 1982:92].

The Defiance Campaign, by involving people at the grassroots level, drew women into political resistance on an unprecedented scale [Wells, 1993:105]. Among the women leaders who gained prominence within the ANC through the Women's League were Josie Palmer, Ida Mtwana, Berthe Mkize, Lilian Ngoyi and Florence Matomela. The Passive Resistance Campaign of the South African Indian Congress [SAIC] in 1946 had a significant impact on Indian women, including Dr Goonam, Fatima Meer and Amina

Cachalia, while prominent women leaders, such as Cissy Gool, emerged from the activities of the Unity Movement and anti-CAD politics in the Cape [Walker, 1982:110].

The proposal for a national conference of women came from Ray Alexander who was influenced by the Women's International Democratic Federation [WIDF], an organisation of socialist women's groups from around the world that was founded in Paris after the War (1946) to campaign for women's rights and world peace. Plans for the National Conference took shape at a meeting with Florence Matomela and Frances Baard in the politically charged atmosphere of Port Elizabeth in 1953 [Walker, 1982:136].

The National Conference of Women took place on 17 April 1954 in the Trades Hall, Johannesburg. Approximately 150 women were present, including representatives from the ANC Women's League, the SAIC, the Congress of Democrats, various trade unions, religious and social organisations. The Conference resolved to establish a non-racial women's organisation that would:

"help to strengthen, build and bring together in joint activity the various women's sections in the liberatory movements... participate in the struggles of the working and oppressed peoples for the removal of class and race discrimination... express the needs and aspirations of housewives, wage earners, peasants and professional women of South Africa... [and] bring about the emancipation of women from the special disabilities suffered by them under laws, customs and conventions, and strive for a genuine South African democracy based on complete equality and friendship between men and women..." ["Report of the First National Conference of Women", 1954:1].

In the year that followed, FSAW voiced the women's concerns on several issues, including Bantu Education, housing and the

nursing crisis, and worked within the Congress Alliance to prepare women for the Kliptown Congress of the People in 1955. The issue that struck the deepest chord for African women, however, was the Government's plans to extend the pass laws to women throughout the Union.

Pre-War legislation to control African women's urbanisation had been haphazard and ineffective in preventing the influx of women pushed to the cities by the erosion of the subsistence economies of the 'Native Reserves' from the 1920s onwards [Wells, 1993:91]. Few of these women found jobs in the formal sector, not even in domestic service, which was dominated by African men until the late 1930s. Besides the physical barriers that prevented these women from working - job reservation for whites, restricted working hours for women, lack of child care facilities - there was also a powerful discursive barrier in the minds of white employers.

Kathy Eales attributes the reluctance of whites to employ African women to a discourse that developed in the 1920s and 1930s, that urban African women were by nature "immoral" and "harbingers of disease" [Eales in Bonner et al, 1989:108-109]. Many African women had to turn instead to informal work in the townships, providing domestic services such as washing, as well as more lucrative activities like beer-brewing and prostitution. It was this growing population of urbanised African women, living independently of white employers and tribal patriarchal authority, who posed a threat to Segregationist ideology.

A cornerstone of the National Party's plan to systematise Segregation was to prevent (and reverse as far as possible) any permanent migration of African women from the Reserves to the 'white' cities and towns of the Union. The Natives (Abolition and Co-ordination of Documents) Act of 1952 provided the mechanism of control by requiring African women within the Union to carry passbooks at all times, enabling police to check a woman's employment and residential status at a glance. Although the government only began to enforce the Act in 1956, FSAW anticipated the threat it posed to African women and began campaigning against passes in 1955.

The need for a co-ordinated anti-pass campaign became clear at the two conferences held by FSAW in 1955: the March Conference at which the document, "What Women Demand", was prepared for the Kliptown Congress and the Transvaal "Congress of Mothers" held in August. At the Congress of Mothers, FSAW resolved to hold a mass demonstration against the pass laws at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, an idea that was influenced by the publicity surrounding the Black Sash vigils against the Senate Bill held at the Union Buildings since June.

FSAW Executive member, Helen Joseph, participated in the Black Sash's forty-eight-hour vigil and records the feeling of the delegates at the Congress of Mothers as being: "The white women did not invite us... but we shall ask them to join our protest. It must be a protest of all women" [Joseph, 1966:65]. However, the women of the Black Sash did not join the protest and it soon

became clear that the "mass support would come from the African women" [Joseph, 1966:66].

The refusal of the Black Sash to support FSAW's demonstration indicates a key difference between the two organisations, namely the tacit acceptance of the dominant racial discourse of the time on the part of the Black Sash versus the multi-racial contestatory discourse of FSAW. Two reasons given for the exclusivity of the Black Sash at this stage are, firstly, that they did not wish to identify themselves with an organisation influenced by communism, and secondly, that their campaign was over a constitutional issue and therefore relevant only to women who had the vote [Hacking, 1994].

Keeping their distance from FSAW was also a strategic tactic, as Michelman points out:

"they were right in believing that part of their effectiveness lay in their white, upper-class image and their political respectability... caution in racial matters was dictated by the belief that the League's influence used carefully was a powerful weapon; used recklessly it would merely alienate those whom it sought to convince, and become ineffectual" [Michelman, 1975:42].

Despite Government attempts to prevent FSAW's gathering from taking place - the Pretoria City Council refused permission to assemble and transport licences were refused - the police took no action against the two thousand women who occupied the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings on the 27 October 1955.

This encouraged FSAW to organise a second protest at Pretoria,



this time to demonstrate their opposition to pass laws to the Prime Minister in person. Once again, the Government chose to ignore the women protestors and Prime Minister Strijdom refused to meet their representatives. However, FSAW succeeded in making history with the enormous gathering at the Union Buildings of an estimated twenty thousand women from across the country on the 9 August 1956.

In the face of such massive resistance displayed by urban women in the Witwatersrand area, the Government decided to stagger the issueing of pass books, starting with the politically more isolated women of the smaller towns and rural areas. Although rural women in several areas responded violently against the issueing of pass books, there was no nationally co-ordinated campaign and FSAW-organised protests were confined to the urban centres [Wells, 1993:115].

The arrival of the pass-issueing units in Johannesburg in 1958 sparked off the most dramatic protests by FSAW women. On the 21 October 1958, a group of angry women in Sophiatown marched on the pass office. They were intercepted by the police who arrested half of the women. In a show of solidarity the rest of the women demanded to be arrested, making a total of 250 arrests [Wells, 1993:119]. This launched a spontaneous passive resistance campaign in which approximately 2000 women were gaoled in the course of ten days.

Although prominent ANC leaders initially supported the women (Mandela provided legal support, while husbands, Sisulu and

Mlangeni brought food daily) the detention of this number of women caused a crisis not only for the authorities, but for the women's husbands and families [Wells, 1993:120]. In November, the ANC executive co-ordinated the payment of bail by the women's husbands and informed FSAW that the Executive would take full responsibility for the anti-pass campaign from then on. This action ultimately took the wind out of FSAW's sails, as Wells argues:

"it in effect defused the intense energy of the women's struggle... the failure of the male leaders of the ANC to understand the basic gender dynamics which underlay the situation led to the mistaken assumption that women's energies could simply be redirected into other campaigns... the moment of decision for the women would never come again in quite the same way." [Wells, 1993:122-123]

Having outlined the historical context of the political organisation of women in the Black Sash and the Federation of South African Women in the 1950s, one can now focus attention on the ways in which these two organisations were represented at the time, in texts produced by themselves and by both hostile and sympathetic newspapers and journals. The proceeding analysis of discourses operating within these texts will be informed as much by knowledge of this historical and institutional context in which the texts were produced as by the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 4: THE BLACK SASH

The publicity surrounding the Senate Bill issue in 1955, as well as the Black Sash women's own financial, and other, resources available for publishing their views have produced a substantial body of written texts about the organisation during the period 1955-1958. This chapter will discuss findings about the representation of women in these texts in general and also provide more detailed analysis of specific texts to illustrate the general findings.

As stated in chapter 2, the texts have been distinguished into two categories: the external representation of the Black Sash, in the newspapers and parliamentary speeches; and the internal self-representation of the organisation, in Sash, public statements and members' letters to the press.

Of importance to the analysis is to note that the institutions of parliament and the press (particularly the political news desk) in the 1950s were staffed almost exclusively by men. As such, the newspaper reports and parliamentary speeches may be regarded as both an outsider's, and a male, perspective on the Black Sash.

The representation of the Black Sash in Sash magazine, public statements and member's letters is of an organisation to which the authors of the texts themselves belong. Therefore it may be regarded as a self-representation of their own activities and beliefs, as well as a female perspective on the women's

organisation. This distinction is made to investigate whether the dominant patriarchal discourse that "women's place is in the home and not in politics" operates within the texts of both categories, or whether there is a consistent difference between the discursive features of the one category of texts and those of the other.

In addition, the external representation of the Black Sash is distinguished into two sub-categories - texts that are supportive of the political aims of the Black Sash and texts that are opposed to them. This is to see whether the operation of patriarchal discourse within positive and negative representations of the Black Sash differs, and in what way.

The chapter will deal firstly with the hostile representations of the Black Sash from the National Party perspective, secondly with the laudatory reports that appeared in the English press, and thirdly with the texts produced by the Black Sash itself.

#### **4.1. External representations of the Black Sash:**

One encounters a stark contrast between the representation of the Black Sash by the Afrikaans and by the English commercial newspapers. This should be understood within the context of the political conflict between the National Party and the United Party over the manipulation of the 1910 Constitution to remove the Cape Coloured franchise, and the underlying ethnic conflict between English- and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans.

The Black Sash deliberately tried to organise and portray itself as a "bilingual group" campaigning against a fundamental challenge to democracy that transcended "party political" divisions [Sash 1/56: 1]. Undermining this, the press tended to ignore these gestures of unity of English and Afrikaans women on an issue of 'moral principle', moulding public perception that the organisation belonged exclusively to the 'English camp'. English commercial dailies such as The Cape Times, The Argus, The Star, Rand Daily Mail and the Natal Mercury identified with the "Sash women" while the position of the Afrikaans newspapers is indicated by an article in Die Transvaler that wrote of "The Sash and its jingo-press [jingokoerante]", denying the existence of any liberal Afrikaans supporters within its ranks:

"The Sash and its apologists had mixed the propaganda mixture so strongly that by the end of the week many people were under the impression that there was a boycott of Afrikaners against Afrikaners. 'The Sash' are apparently innocent - it is the Afrikaners who are prepared to cut their own throats and dig their own graves! The whole position is laughable." [Die Transvaler translated in Rogers, 1956:272].

What is particularly striking about the representation of the Black Sash by both the Afrikaans and English newspapers, however, is that the political stance of the organisation vis-à-vis the Senate Bill issue receives less attention than the remarkable fact that it is women who have taken up the issue. Both the English and Afrikaans newspapers fixate on the gender of the Black Sash members, representing the organisation in positive and negative stereotypes of womanhood

respectively, both of which are constructed by the "public man/private woman" discourse. Hence, at the explicit level the conflict over the Senate Bill issue positions the two as rival opposites, but the preconstructed elements of the newspaper texts share a similar identification with the dominant patriarchal discourse.

#### **4.1.1 Afrikaans newspapers - "...an undignified spectacle":**

The level of misogyny displayed in NP ministers' speeches and in the cartoons and editorials of the Government supporting-press about the Black Sash is staggering, especially considering that the Senate Bill issue was not a 'woman's issue'. This fixation on the gender of the Black Sash membership can be regarded as both a conscious political tactic to discredit the organisation, as well as a less conscious reflex against politically active women.

The speech by Froneman, discussed in the introduction, that dismissed the agenda of the Black Sash as the "sublimations of frustrated females" may be taken as typical of the representation of the hostile camp, as are the cartoons reproduced as appendix 1. Although the Black Sash lacked feminist consciousness, they were aware of the Afrikaans press' technique of discrediting them. Founding member of the Black Sash, Mrs Dorothy Hacking, commented that,

"The media was paying us a great deal of attention and the public was really interested, while the Nationalists were ridiculing these stupid women who had pitted themselves against a male world" [Hacking, 1994:4].

The Minister of Finance and External Affairs, Mr Eric Louw, described the first Black Sash demonstration as follows:

"the hysteria shown by the women who marched in Johannesburg... [was] like that of their daughters who got worked up when some well-known movie actor or crooner arrived in South Africa... They say they marched six abreast. Well, I don't know their hip measurements, but..."

Mirabel Rogers used the terms "crude" "ridicule" to describe Louw's lack of "courtesy to all women" [Rogers, 1956:24]. Although the Black Sash women show an awareness of the explicit ridicule of women as a Nationalist tactic to dismiss the Black Sash, their objections to the negative portrayal do not go beyond demanding courtesy and dignity as women.

The demand for courtesy towards women does nothing to contest the underlying constructions of the public man/ private woman discourse contained in the negative representations. Rather, this defense of the Black Sash rests on the same patriarchal discursive structures, indicating that the Black Sash texts were also moulded by the assumptions of women's required modesty of conduct and recognition of their primary duty to the home. This will be shown in the second section of this chapter.

The visual representation of Black Sash women in cartoons that appeared in Die Transvaler, Die Vaderland and Die Burger gives a clear indication of the ways in which the Nationalist press

tried to discredit the Black Sash. Firstly, the activities of the Black Sash are trivialised as a "laughable spectacle". Figure 1.4 depicts a poster for the "U.P. Cinema", advertising the Black Sash protests as "a crying comedy", "the Fanciful Follies" in which the "Sashbuckling ladies" - a parody of the cinema cliché of the 'swashbuckling' hero - "demonstrate how mourning becomes mockery" in "a unique parade of political coquetry". The vacuous-looking ladies appearing to float along distributing propaganda are a parody of the representation of Black Sash women as "moral guardian angels" by the liberal press.

Secondly, the women are depicted as aberrations of the feminine. Figure 1.1 draws on the stereotype of the mannish spinster 'suffragette' who takes part in politics as an outlet for her frustrations at failure in the domestic sphere. Figure 1.2 also contrasts the unattractiveness of the Black Sash activists to the exaggerated feminine ideal of the "Folies-bergere" (also a play on words 'folly' and 'foolish'), as do the following lines, collected as "the Nationalist viewpoint" in a Black Sash scrapbook:

"Men seldom cut dashes with women in black sashes,  
Nats don't break out in rashes for women in black sashes,  
Ministers don't get pashes on women in black sashes,  
Men won't wear sackcloth and ashes for women in black sashes'  
Men don't twirl mustaches at women in black sashes." [Black Sash archive, Johannesburg]



The discourse underlying these representations taps into the Western patriarchal discourse of "femininity". Mary Poovey's The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer identifies this discourse as creating an ideal of feminine behaviour in which the "proper lady" is modest and passive, rather than active, an attractive object of male desire rather than an independent, thinking, acting subject [Poovey, 1984:x].

By transgressing this ideal of passivity, active women voicing , their campaigns in public, by definition cannot be attractive to men - hence the stereotypical ugly and frustrated activists who appear in these cartoons. Poovey argues that the feminine ideal acts as a powerful "constraint put upon the strength and the mind of women by public opinion as to what custom deems acceptable... [and] must harm women's progress in every sphere" [Poovey, 1984:x].

#### **4.1.2 English Newspapers - "...the intuitive wisdom of women":**

In contrast to these negative caricatures of women, the English-medium liberal press showed their sympathy to the Black Sash cause in idealised images of womanly dignity and virtue. The cartoon from the Natal Mercury [appendix 2.2] puts the Black Sash woman quite literally on a pedestal, as the spirit, or angel, of the female symbol of the South African Constitution. This cartoon draws on the tradition of female personifications of liberty, and the woman wearing the black sash is literally

the spirit that remains of this symbol, after Prime Minister Strijdom has done violence to the statue. She is radiating moral light and points in silent accusation at the wrongdoing of the Prime Minister.

A similar representation of the Black Sash woman as an other-worldly spirit exists in figure 2.3, in the moral light of "fair play" that radiates from her, blinding the mortal man in the picture. The cartoon is titled "The Voice of Conscience" although the woman is silent, or without voice, and her passive silence is a reproach to the conscience of the man. This idealisation is echoed in the editorial lead article of The Sunday Express, that states "The figure of justice is a woman. The figure of liberty is a woman... There are many other examples Mr Strijdom might profitably remember" [12/11/1955].

Eight themes or statements about women may be identified as the underlying assumptions that inform a significant number of articles about the Black Sash that appeared in the English press. They are as follows:

1. Women's primary duty and natural talent is the role of mother and wife.
2. Women are naturally modest and self-effacing.
3. Women do not belong in politics under normal circumstances.
4. Women are physically weaker than men and are therefore unsuited to the rigours of political activism.
5. Men achieve their aims by direct action while women appeal to the conscience of others by 'silent reproach'.

6. Silent protests are a fitting 'dignified' form of protest for women.
7. Women have a strong sense of morality.
8. Women's thought is intuitive, while men's is rational.

The editorial, "Wisdom in Women" that appears in The Cape Times [14/2/1956] is a good example of the operation of these patriarchal discursive features within a text about the Black Sash. The opening paragraph compares the reception of the Black Sash road convoy to a similar post-war demonstration by the organisation of liberal ex-servicemen, the Torch Commando:

"Cape Town showed a warm heart to the Black Sash convoy yesterday. There was none of the excitement and tenseness that marked the assembly of the Torch Commando after a Union-wide pilgrimage on wheels stimulated by a similar revulsion against a threat to the constitution; but this demonstration by the women of South Africa is more impressive than that... for nothing but the deepest conviction would move hundreds of responsible women, many of them mothers with the cares of homes and growing families, to embark on an arduous journey in convoy, ending with no less arduous hours on their feet outside the houses of parliament." ["Wisdom in Women" in The Cape Times 14/2/1956]

The comparison is between two organisations with an almost identical political outlook and agenda, and yet the organisation with male members evokes "excitement" and "tenseness" with the expectation of action, while the women are supposed to invoke warmth and admiration for undertaking an arduous journey to which they are physically unsuited. The circumstances are portrayed as exceptional for these "responsible women" whose

primary responsibility is to their homes and families to have to put aside these duties.

Paradoxically, these women are not represented as actively challenging the Government. Instead, they stand outside the male realm of the Houses of Parliament "praying that this display of resolution will touch the conscience of the Government, or that, if it fails in that purpose, it will touch the conscience of the country" [ibid.]. This construction is repeated further on:

"...again with the wisdom of women, they have eschewed the way of clamant protest, hoping that by dignity and sincerity they may make an impression on hearts and consciences..." [ibid.].

The "conscience of the country" can be taken to mean the conscience of white, male voters whose rational, procedural approach to politics has left them lagging behind women's intuitive perception of the threat the Senate Bill presents. The editorial concludes on a patronising note:

"There is an intuitive wisdom in women which often goes to the heart of a matter while men spend protracted hours and days of rationalisation and argument. This, we believe, is an example" [ibid.].

The editorial article appearing in The Sunday Express in November 1955 also places the Black Sash women on a pedestal for their supposedly intuitive sense of justice:

"There have been a lot of people who have doubted the usefulness of the Black Sash campaign... Their doubts have been quite understandable. The men in power are strong men... And yet the women know that capitulation to the bully means the end of

self-respect; the end of family life... Once you fall foul of them, and once they organise on a big scale, you might as well throw in your hand. As often as not, they are not acutely politically well briefed. Their arguments may not always be based on the finer points of the law or on actual precedents. But they have a sense which few men possess; they know instinctively whether a thing is right or wrong."

The discourse that occurs within the texts of the liberal press may be associated the Victorian discourse of the "proper lady" who is an "angel of the home". In her account of the South African suffrage campaign which had the same social base as the Black Sash, that is, predominantly white, middle-class English-speaking women, Cherryl Walker argues that the British brought them to Southern Africa, "the sexual morality and gender ideology of the Victorian middle class, in which feminine modesty [and] domesticity... were extolled [Walker, 1990:319].

The discourse of the "angel of the home" has its roots in the development of industrial capitalism in Britain which entailed, "a fundamental shift in the social function of the home and family away from its earlier importance as a site of production, to a site, primarily of reproduction and consumption" [Walker, 1990:318]. This English middle class ideal was reinforced in the colonial context in which white women had black domestic servants, allowing the Victorian way of life to last well into the Twentieth Century for most white South Africans.

The light load of domestic tasks for these white women did, however, also result in their searching for fulfilling activities outside the home. Parallel to the discourse of the "angel of the home", arose a tradition of women acting as public

moral campaigners against social ills. Just as the 'first wave' of British and American feminism evolved out of middle class women's organisational experience in moral campaigns such as the abolitionist movement, the women's suffrage campaign in South Africa built on the tradition of women's missionary work and organisations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

The precedent of moral campaigning by this sector of women provided an approving, yet conservative, way for the liberal press to represent women's political action over a Bill that had more to do with power politics than it did with moral principles. Hence the sympathetic representation of the Black Sash is of woman's role extended from her primary duty in the home, to that of moral guardian angel of the society at large.

#### **4.2 Self-conception - 'moral guardians' and 'thinking women':**

Not surprisingly, the Black Sash themselves also drew on this discourse of an acceptable form of public action by women, and they describe theirs as a "moral campaign" rather than as political activism by women. There was, however, an undercurrent of excitement in the development of political consciousness among their members that stands uneasily next to assertions that the campaign was only temporary or that the women were more interested in home duties than in politics.

In the first issue of their publication, the Black Sash wrote enthusiastically about their first year of activity: "Never

feminine and a shining example of the perfect housewife - in addition she will be logical, wise and well-informed - aware of her civic duties and competent and eager to exercise them. It will be nothing to her to take over the Chair at a difficult meeting. She will have her facts at her finger ends and the situation under control, and she will confound her opponents and disarm all criticism... prejudice and abuse will go down before the vigour of her approach..." [The Black Sash, September 1956]

It is useful to examine these and other themes of the self-conception of the Black Sash by focusing firstly on several specific texts in detail, and secondly on making some general observations from a wider sample of texts.

### **Sash Cartoons - "We must do something..."**

In these visual representations of the Black Sash [appendices 3.1-3.3] that appear in its journal, Sash, one can see the striking differences between the self-conception of the organisation and the way it was represented in the press. Compared to the idealised women portrayed in the English press on a pedestal, standing in silent reproach to the men, or radiating the moral virtue of angels, these cartoons show the kind of 'real' women members could identify with, rather than an abstraction of 'Woman' with a capital 'W'. These images of ordinary middle class women "getting on with the job" also refute the overbearing, sexless stereotypes portrayed in the hostile Nationalist newspapers.

If one isolates three cartoon images, the "spinster suffragette" of the Afrikaans press [appendix 1.1], the figure

of reproach radiating "fair play" in the liberal press [appendix 2.3], and the Sash representation of the woman wearing the black sash [appendix 3.1], then it is significant that the two images from the press, negative and positive stereotypes, are both passive and silent. By contrast, the woman of the Sash cartoon is active and vocal, bailing water out of the sinking South African democracy while calling on the other woman to "do something before it's too late!".

The two actions of the Black Sash woman in this cartoon, i.e. bailing water out of the boat and admonishing the other woman to help, may be seen to represent the two objectives of the organisation: to act against undemocratic manipulation of the Constitution and to educate and mobilise other members of the (white) public. The message of this cartoon is directed at women like the one sitting passively in the boat, wrapped up in materialistic self-interest and dependent on her husband (she is thinking of asking her husband to buy her a new costume). Her political ignorance and frivolity are depicted as inappropriate to the situation and endangering both people in the sinking boat.

Cartoons 3.2 and 3.3 are also both aimed at stirring the conscience of affluent white women. The woman wearing the sensible dress, hat and bag in both cartoons is canvassing other women to participate in politics, by voting (3.3) and by joining the Black Sash (3.2). In 3.3 the canvasser is not wearing a black sash as she is working for an election campaign,



however she can be assumed to be a member (note her resemblance to the Black Sash campaigner in 3.2). The other woman in both cartoons is coded as the "frivolous socialite" by her fashionable glasses, hairstyle, jewellery and clothing.

Appendix 3.3 is a pointed criticism of the woman who is too caught up in the "social whirl" of her leisured lifestyle to pay any attention to serious political issues. The implication is that she is wasting her hard-earned right to vote.

Appendix 3.2 relies on the irony of the woman's excuse for not participating while surrounded by servants (including a male servant) doing the "women's work" and waiting on her hand and foot. It is a satirical challenge to women of their class not to hide behind the discourse that "women's work is in the home" when they clearly are at leisure to get involved in the public sphere.

The cartoon echoes a statement made by Jean Sinclair at the time, that South African women were "blessed" with domestic help which freed them to work outside the home. This is testimony to the reality that white women in South Africa were able to escape the domestic sphere to make their public mark at the expense of African women who worked in white homes as domestic servants. It is also notable that the cartoon does not deny the statement, "women's work is in the home", but implies that public work is an additional duty of the woman who has already fulfilled the demands of her home.

### **"The Choice before Us":**

This article, published in the March issue of Sash 1956, came in the wake of the United Party's appeal against the final passing of the South Africa Act Amendment Act, an appeal the Black Sash recognised as essentially a formality, when the organisation abruptly suspended all demonstrations over the issue [Michelman, 1975:58]. Hence, the article is a summing up of the campaign, drawing from it the "knowledge painfully acquired" by the women and identifying new goals for the application of their developed principles of "political morality" and public vigilance of parliament to keep it in line with "standards of morality and integrity".

The key lesson learnt from the campaign, according to this article, is that women, in particular, need to break out of their political ignorance and apathy in order to prevent abuses of government power. This sense of compliance with injustice by remaining passive in the traditional role of women is indicated in the following extract:

"It seemed to us that our indignation should not be directed solely against the latest of a long list of measures that had whittled away our freedoms, but that the attitudes of mind which had not only permitted but encouraged these pieces of legislation should be wholly condemned. This attitude of mind was in ourselves as well as in those whose policy we had observed with such misgivings. If political morality was almost altogether absent in the legislation of the last years, the fault lay partially with us. We had, by remaining passive before such legislation, condoned it."

Considered in relation to the dominant discourse of women as passive, domestic angels or moral guardians, the theme of the article is about the transformation of white South African woman, from the passive figure preoccupied with and isolated in her home, to a figure who translates her moral role in the private family into an active moral stance in the wider public sphere. Becoming politically informed and active is turned into a moral duty of women rather than a transgression of the feminine ideal.

This type of public moral guardian differs from the one presented in the male-dominated press. She is not represented as a passive symbol of morality appealing to the (male) public to act, rather, she is represented as a participant in the public realm thinking through every piece of legislation billed and judging it according to her own considered principles. The opening statements of the article assert this in quite aggressive terms:

"The Black Sash movement was a natural outcome of the anger of thinking women in South Africa at the stupidity shown by a group of men since their election to office in 1948. The mounting tally of their acts of unreason was disrupting the tranquillity of the country... [The women] had long waited for men to give them a lead; but men, it seemed to them, merely argued on the sidelines, all but a few avoiding the main issues."

It is significant to note that the contrast made here between "thinking women" and the "acts of unreason" made by men, is a direct inversion of the Cape Times article, "Wisdom in Women", that compares women's intuition with men's need to "rationalise"

and reason about political matters. The dominant discourse of public, rational man versus private, intuitive woman is thus inverted.

Overall, however, the article does not imply a radical break for women from their traditional domestic role of housewife and mother. The sentence, "they set temporarily aside their manifold duties in their homes", suggests that the two roles, private and public, are not compatible. Women can only justify setting the public duty over the private during times of political crisis, when the long-term "future safety of her children" takes precedence over their day-to-day care.

The tension between the assumption that a woman's highest duty is to her family, and the emerging sense of woman's civic duty, is not resolved, leaving the impression that women must fulfill both roles simultaneously. The article ends with an admonition to all women, "career woman, mother and grandmother to now make her choice", to become active campaigners against immoral Government or, "allow disaster to come to us because she couldn't be bothered" (she is apathetic); "she was too busy" (putting her personal interests before her public duty); "or she didn't understand" (she was uninformed and politically ignorant)". It is this ambivalence that characterises the emerging contestatory discourse in this and other early texts of the Black Sash.

### "Women in Politics":

The tension between acceptance of the dominant discourse and outright rejection of it is particularly evident in the article, "Women in Politics", which begins with a radical assertion:

"The fallacy that women have no place in politics dies hard. Probably it will never die because men, who run the political game, like to nurse that illusion." [Sash, March 1956]

However, the article then changes direction completely by comparing the political influence of "exceptional women" who are distinguished by "subtlety, ruthlessness and ambition" and are politically "at work all the time, crisis or no crisis", to "'ordinary' wives and mothers, working spinsters, benign aunts and beloved grandmothers". The latter are the women who make up the Black Sash:

"[their] influence in politics only comes into action intermittently and at times of crisis... [they are] not particularly subtle, certainly not ambitious and normally not ruthless... Their great strength is that they are not interested in the rules. They do not know anything about the political 'game' - and do not want to know... They have [not] lost their amateur status... The Black Sash women are not interested in the political game. They yawn when their menfolk talk about the niceties of procedure... But they have seen an issue straight and know what ought to be done about it." [ibid.]

Instead of directly inverting the constraining discourse of public man/private woman, as was the case with the inversion of "thinking women" and men's "acts of unreason" in the previous

article, another form of counter-identification takes place here. The dominant discourse is appropriated and the negative attributes of women turned into advantages in this situation of political crisis. The women's political ignorance is declared as a matter of pride - they "do not want to know" about the "political game" - they are proud of their "ordinary" status as respectable wives, mothers and grandmothers. They reject the male values of politics: ambition, subtlety and ruthlessness, and in this sense accept the patriarchal construction of women. However, there appears to be a distinction made between the "political game", run by men, which is associated with the cynical power play of professional politicians and irrelevant "rules" and "procedure", and the politics of critical issues.

It is then asserted that women are actually better qualified to recognise and deal with these more fundamental issues in a political crisis, because they have no cynical or self-serving motives. The women's exclusion from the "game" is turned into their "great strength" - they do not respect the rules or procedure of this male domain and can therefore move straight to the principle and 'deal with it'.

### **"The Power of Women's Organisations":**

Published in the December issue of Sash 1957, this article appeared towards the end of what Michelman calls the "second phase" of the organisation, a period of reflection and of

political education of its members [Michelman, 1975:62]. The article is a reflection on the strengths and achievements of the Black Sash, and of the aptitude of women generally for achieving political change. Namely, these are women's "powers of persistence, doggedness and tenacity of purpose" [Sash, 1957:4].

These qualities are claimed to give women a natural advantage over men when it comes to effecting political change, for "in the end it must be persistence which wins the day" [ibid.]. Also natural to women is the moral tone of their participation: "[The Black Sash] arose because the women felt that, as the natural guardians of their children's heritage, they must uphold moral issues [ibid.]".

Not only is this form of political participation natural to women, but it has historically always been their role, according to the first half of the article. It begins:

"From the very beginning of history, women have played a telling and extremely important part in the shaping of the destinies, not only of men, but of all, although systems of government in the Ancient World were based on the theory that women should take no part in political matters..." [Sash, 1957:3]

The paragraphs that follow refer to political achievements of women in Ancient Greece, then skip to Nineteenth Century Britain and references to John Stuart Mill and the Women's Suffragette Movement. This historical account ends with a contemporary example: women's defense of the church in Peronist Argentina in 1955, writing:

"Within three months Peron had fled the country... as a result of the fact that they had had the courage to protest publicly and lead the way to action... And now to South Africa and... the Black Sash, as it is now called..." [ibid.].

The public action of these South African women is thus legitimated by being situated within an historical trajectory of important women's organisations in politics. Significantly, the public action of the Black Sash is further legitimated by men:

"The men stated 'You have started something the like of which has never been seen in South Africa. You cannot let it die'" [ibid.].

The implication is that their public action has impressed and also gained the approval of their menfolk, providing them with a mandate to carry on. The organisation's role is to challenge public apathy at a time when "not to protest implied consent", and to "stand for unity, integrity and political morality, and... carry on the fight until South Africa has the high standard of political morality that is the heritage of democracy." [ibid.].

There is no mention made in this article of the members having had to undergo a process of self-education. Rather, the Black Sash women are presented in a kind of vanguard role:

"The movement is awakening public awareness to the fact that our liberties are being curtailed and is making people think. It has been the country's conscience... by its educational position attempting to create... an enlightened electorate." [ibid.].

Unlike the two articles written in March 1956, this conception of the Black Sash is not apologetic nor self-conscious about its



members' lack of political knowledge, but portrays an organisation that is newly confident in its public and political role as a Government watchdog.

That the educative campaign is aimed specifically at other women of their social class is indicated by the sentence, "South African women have the vote thanks to their sisters in Britain and the Black Sash hopes to see that they will use it intelligently" [ibid.]. Again, the total blindness to the majority of South African women who do not have the vote is striking.

The article ends with an apparently 'proto-feminist' statement of bravado:

"I sincerely hope that our menfolk realise the veritable store of dormant dynamite with which their very daily existence is so closely allied" [ibid.].

As a conclusion, this sentence frames the article as a distinct assertion of women's capability in the political realm and of their determination to continue work there as the Black Sash. There is a greater level of 'disidentification' from the dominant discourse in this article compared with those written in March 1956. For example, in "Women in Politics" the image of women as politically ignorant is appropriated and turned to their advantage (counter-identification, that reverses power relations of the same discourse), this article argues that women have played an important part in politics all along, and to this extent breaks more radically from the discourse that maintains

women do not belong in the public sphere. While there are certainly contradictory elements in the this text that undercut this assertion, as a whole, this text indicates a form of contestatory feminist discourse emerging in the self-conception of the Black Sash.

### **Silent protest as a discursive practice:**

If one is looking for the most direct evidence of the process of 'discourse adaptation', it can be found outside of the written texts of Sash and the articulated self-conception of individual members. The process is embodied in the method of political protest adopted by the early organisation that became its trademark in later years. The title of an article by Mary Burton, "The Silent Protesters", refers to the practice of Black Sash members standing in silence in a public place as a sign of protest [Jaster & Jaster, 1993:64].

Originally the women would stand at places of reception of Nationalist Party Cabinet Minister - at airports, public meetings, outside buildings - in order to "haunt" them with their silent reproach. They also held silent vigils outside various government buildings, wearing black sashes and with their heads bowed in mourning for the Constitution. This form of protest became a particularly powerful tradition as state repression increased and the stance of the organisation became more controversial. In the 1970s and 1980s, the sight of a white

woman in black sash standing in silence with a placard on a busy street made a dramatic impression on passersby without contravening government restrictions on illegal gatherings and subversive statements.

In terms of the dominant patriarchal discourse of the 1950s, that women should be silent and politically passive, the act of women standing silent with bowed heads and downcast eyes has a subversive irony when it is conducted as a form of public protest. The practice of holding silent vigils and 'hauntings' was a clever way for the Black Sash to make themselves heard in an era when loud confrontation by women would have shocked and alienated the general public.

Instead, their apparently modest public demonstrations earned lavish praise from the English press for "the quiet and dignified protest of the Black Sash women" [Outlook, September 1955 in Rogers, 1956:242]. This public support was achieved while still giving the members a sense that they were, indeed, taking a strong stand, as this comment by member, Patricia Wolstenholme, conveys:

"There is something forceful, direct and uncompromising about the thing that at first strikes terror into the hearts of timid souls like myself, who prefer to walk on the far side of the street and lose themselves, modestly and effectively, in the crowd. I joined the Black Sash because my reason told me that modesty and self-effacement would never win the battle against dictatorship..." [in Rogers, 1956:254].

It is this conscious realization on the part of the women who took part in the Black Sash that jarred against the dominant patriarchal ideology of the time.

**Recurring themes within the Black Sash texts:**

From these and other texts produced by members of the Black Sash, five themes can be identified as central to their self-conception of their role as women and as members of a political organisation. These are:

1. Women have a public role, or a civic duty to become politically aware and vigilant of possible abuses of government power. This idea is derived from classic liberal notions of social contract, in particular, from Lockean social contract theory.
2. This public duty of women is, however, somewhat different from the duty of men. The public duty of women is derived directly from, and legitimated only by, their private duty as good mothers to "safeguard the future of their children".
3. Women cannot hide behind the traditional assumption that "women's work is in the home" as an excuse for neglecting their public duties, or for political ignorance and apathy.

4. The role of the Black Sash is to lead the way for public vigilance of government by educating and mobilising the public and, in particular, other women.

5. This role is depicted as "moral" rather than "political". The Black Sash are the "moral guardians" of a democratic society and not its politicians.

Together, these themes form a new discourse about the role of women in politics which contests the basic assumption of the dominant discourse that 'women have no place in politics'. At the same time, it is only a partial rejection of the discourse of separate spheres for men and women, because it still rests on the assumption that women's natural and primary duty is to the family and it is only from this point of departure that her public activism is justified.

The emergent new discourse of the Black Sash in its early phase can thus be considered as an adaptation of, rather than a radical break from, the dominant discourse about women's place in society. This process may be described by imagining the dominant discourse as a restrictive garment which the Black Sash women alter to fit them, to suit their new, active role in the public realm of politics.

## CHAPTER 5: FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

The extension of pass laws to African women was an issue that directly affected the lives of all black women in the Union and the 'Native reserves'. The legislation and its implications were particularly threatening to urban women who made a living independently from white employers and it was they who were the most defiant in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban. Political action for African women, therefore, was a matter of urgent necessity rather than choice and the campaigns of FSAW were in this sense different from the Senate Bill campaign of the Black Sash.

On the other hand, the first National Conference of Women (1954) at which FSAW was launched was organised with a far more conscious intention to mobilise and unite South African women than was the founding of the Black Sash. The speeches and the Women's Charter, ratified as a manifesto at the conference, placed South African women's struggles within an international feminist perspective of women's oppression world-wide - an influence of organisers Ray Alexander and Hilda Watts [Walker, 1982:156].

This chapter follows a similar structure to that of chapter 4, dealing firstly with the external representation of the activities of FSAW and in contrast, secondly, to the self-representation of the organisation by its members. Once again, the external representation texts have been separated into those

produced by the allies of the organisation - in this case, the Congress Alliance and the 'black' press - and those produced from an antagonistic position - that is, the newspaper reports that appeared in the white commercial newspapers. The main purpose of this distinction is to show that the same patriarchal ideology operates within some of the positive representations of FSAW as it does within negative representations - a point consistent with findings about representations of the Black Sash. As in the representations of the Black Sash, the perspective of both the white and black commercial press is male, versus the female perspective of the FSAW texts.

### **5.1 External Representations of FSAW:**

As an organisation of predominantly black women engaged in resistance to the status quo of white domination, the Federation of South African Women was in a very different relation to the South African media than was the Black Sash. It was stated in Chapter 4 that the commercial newspapers in the 1950s were almost exclusively controlled by whites and aimed at a white readership.

The exceptions to this were the immensely successful commercial newspapers published by Bantu Press (Pty) Ltd., aimed at black readers and staffed by black journalists [Switzer & Switzer, 1979:7-9]. Ultimately, however, financial control of Bantu Press was in the hands of white businessmen such as Jim

Baily and owned by Argus Printing and Publishing Company. Although over half the shareholders of Bantu Press were black when the company was founded in 1932, Switzer and Switzer state that, "under the Argus Company, independent black newspapers were bought out with a measure of reluctance from writers and owners and made to conform to the larger, corporate concerns of the new white owners/managers" [Switzer & Switzer, 1979:7].

One of the most successful publications of Bantu Press was Drum magazine, launched as African Drum in 1951. As a commercial publication, Drum adopted a politically independent stance, although it featured interviews with prominent black political leaders, ANC news and activities, and black social issues. Its political slant may therefore be regarded as equivalent to the Afrikaner nationalist slant of Die Vaderland, Die Transvaler and Die Burger and the liberal slant of The Argus, The Star, The Rand Daily Mail, The Cape Times and The Natal Mercury.

In more explicit support of the Congress Alliance was the independent socialist publication originally titled The Guardian and the Congress Alliance organ (after 1954): Fighting Talk. The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) bannings forced The Guardian to relaunch under four different names in the 1950s. It was titled New Age from 1954-1962, covering the activities of FSAW during this period [Switzer & Switzer, 1979:85].

The distinction between external texts sympathetic to FSAW and those which are unsympathetic is less clear than in the case of the English and Afrikaans newspaper representations of the Black



Sash and covers a wider range of political perspectives. In their representations of FSAW the English and Afrikaans commercial newspapers have been grouped together as the 'white press', while texts from the commercial Drum magazine are analysed as examples of the politically sympathetic, but extremely sexist, perspective of the black commercial press.

Although the Communist publications, Fighting Talk and New Age, were originally researched as part of the 'external' representation of FSAW, the articles covering FSAW activities and the issue of passes for women proved to be completely different from the articles that appeared in the commercial newspapers. In terms of discursive features, these texts echoed FSAW's own publications to such an extent that they are more correctly placed within the category of 'internal' representation of FSAW, giving the insider's perspective on the women's aims and viewpoint.

One explanation that may be offered for this 'close fit' between the discursive configuration of Fighting Talk, New Age and the FSAW publications is that Ruth First was editor of Fighting Talk during the period of focus and was a regular contributor to New Age. As a white woman member of the Congress of Democrats, First would have had much in common with FSAW leaders like Helen Joseph and Ray Alexander. The two longest articles about the anti-pass campaign that appeared in Fighting Talk were written by FSAW women themselves, namely "Women against Passes" by Helen Joseph [January 1956:3] and "Daughters

of 1919" by Phyllis Altman [September 1956:7]. An article by Ruth First about pass laws also appears in the Cape Town based New Age, indicating a close affiliation between the two publications. It is likely that most of the reports on the anti-pass demonstrations that appeared in New Age were written as first-hand accounts by participants.

#### **5.1.1 The White Commercial Press:**

The activities of the Federation of South African Women during the years, 1954-1958, so challenged the prevailing patriarchal and racial discursive construction of black women that the white press, Afrikaans and English, at least in the early stages, hardly acknowledged the action of this group of women at all. Whereas the sight of middle-class white women campaigning against the Nationalist Government provoked an explosion of newspaper reports, editorials, photographs and cartoons, the same newspapers display a conspicuous silence about FSAW. When they do cover the dramatic events of the anti-pass demonstrations, the organisation, FSAW, is hardly mentioned. The general description "Native women" is preferred over, for example, "Federation women" which would be the logical parallel to "Sash women" used to describe the activities of the Black Sash. The demonstrations are portrayed as well-organised, however, the suggestion being that while black women were the

participants in the demonstrations they did not organise the events themselves.

One can concede that, in part, this discrepancy in white newspaper coverage of the two organisations is due to the nature of the political issues at stake and not because these issues were taken up by women per se. The racial dimension - that all the major commercial newspapers were white-owned and catered for a white readership - is also significant. The Black Sash shared with the English commercial papers, such as The Star, The Rand Daily Mail, and The Cape Times, the political perspective of the South African liberal tradition, so that their activities provided a natural terrain for heated debate between the liberal opposition- and government-supporting newspapers. Apart from paying lip service to "Native grievances" and the need to "make demonstrations unnecessary by providing other outlets for discontent" [The Star 29/10/1958], the English commercial press did not identify with the politics of FSAW very much more than the Afrikaans government-supporters did.

At another level, though, the press can be said to display two distinct tendencies toward women's involvement in politics: the one is to trivialise, dismiss or ignore the protests and the other is to overreact to them as remarkable occurrences. In the case of the Black Sash, the Nationalist Party tactic was to trivialise their activities (for example, as "the sublimations of frustrated females") while the English press used the fact that women were protesting as evidence of the extreme threat the

Senate Bill presented to South African society, that it required an exceptional political response from women.

When the events of the women's anti-pass campaign became too dramatic to dismiss or ignore, the white press reported them as a 'remarkable spectacle'. As Cherryl Walker comments of the coverage of the 9 August 1956 demonstration, "newspaper reporters found something unusual and provocative in the sight of this large, multiracial gathering of women", and the mass arrests of 1958,

"were splashed across the newspapers. There were numerous photographs of women in dramatic, challenging poses, being arrested, filling the police vans and being driven off to jail. Once again, the fact that it was women involved in the demonstration brought a special slant to the manner in which the news was presented." [Walker, 1982:197;217]

The discrepancy in coverage of the Black Sash and FSAW in white newspapers also demonstrates the absolute divide between black and white women constructed by a discourse that separates on the basis of race and class as well as gender, giving entirely different content to the terms "European woman" and "Native woman". The seemingly obvious parallels between the Black Sash's demonstration at the Union Buildings in 1955 and FSAW demonstrations there in 1955 and 1956 are never made in the white newspapers.

One encounters a lack of coverage of FSAW activities, initially, but then extensive front page and editorial coverage in all the commercial newspapers of the mass demonstration of 9 August 1956 and of the arrests and trials of the women's passive

resistance campaign in October 1958. Julia Wells documents a parallel reaction from the white authorities who are initially indifferent to the women's anti-pass campaign and then overreact with mass arrests, police violence and bannings from 1958 onwards [Wells, 1993:134]. Wells argues that "the virtual absence of police action against women protesters in the early stages... served to boost the women's morale and confidence" [ibid.]. In this case, the patriarchal assumption that women's political will is of little consequence, actually allowed opportunities for more militant actions. However, Wells argues that a threshold level of militancy on the part of FSAW women was crossed during the arrests of 1958, at which point "both black and white men moved quickly to gain control over and suppress women's initiatives" [ibid.].

By taking a closer look at the central themes of the coverage given to the Union Buildings demonstration and the mass arrests, it will be shown that the discourse that causes indifference to the initial FSAW activities is the same racial-patriarchal discourse which underlies the front page articles, photographs, captions and editorials that appear after the most dramatic events.

The sample of newspaper reports taken for comparative analysis consists of twenty-three reports (a report includes all coverage of anti-pass demonstrations appearing in one newspaper on one date) from six commercial daily newspapers (owned and staffed exclusively by whites), two Afrikaans- and four English-medium,

four published in Johannesburg/Pretoria and two in Cape Town. There was considerably more coverage of the anti-pass demonstrations found in the English liberal newspapers: Pretoria News, The Star, Rand Daily Mail and The Cape Times than in the Government-supporting Afrikaans newspapers: Die Vaderland and Die Burger. An article in Die Burger partially explains why this is the case by stating that coverage of the demonstrations provides "vrugbare stof vir 'n groot mate, van ongunstige publisiteit en kritiek... teen die Regering en die blanke bewind van die Unie [fertile ground in great measure, for unfavourable publicity and criticism... against the government and the white administration of the Union]" [Die Burger 10/8/1956].

While there are important variations in the representations of the different newspapers which one risks homogenising in a comparative analysis, there are nevertheless several features that can be identified within a significant number of reports in each case. The fact that these features recur within the sample of texts allows them to be identified as a discourse that constructs the representation of the women's anti-pass demonstrations in a certain way. These features are:

1. The depiction of political demonstration by women as a remarkable spectacle.
2. Representation of the demonstrations as the organised work of Communist agitators and/or white troublemakers.
3. Black women represented as dependant on, or under the guardianship of, white employers and/or their husbands and fathers.
4. Black women represented, not as active agents in the demonstrations, but as passive victims - either of manipulation by their leaders (presumed to be white, male or both) or of unjust treatment by the government/

authorities.

5. A strong emphasis on the women's behaviour and appearance instead of on their demands and political purpose.

At first glance, the photographs and headlines about the two women's demonstrations at the Union Buildings in the government supporting newspapers, convey a sense of shock and scandal at the "Bonte Betogings in Hoofstad" ["Mixed/mottled Demonstrations in Capital City"]. This bold headline appears in a centre-page spread of Die Vaderland [28/10/1955], accompanied by a photograph of white and black women seated together, with the caption:

"Daar was nie baie blanke vroue onder diegene wat gister by die Unie-gebou kom klagte indien het, maar die wat daar was, het sitplekke tussen die nie-blanke vroue ingeneem, of was doenig met die reelings. [There were not many white women among those who came to hand in petitions at the Union Buildings yesterday, but those who were there seated themselves amongst the non-white women, or busied themselves with the arrangements.]"

There is a sense of scandal in this passage, that appears to be directed at the white women who participated, for not only are they taking part in a public demonstration, but these actions also flout some of the most basic taboos of South African society.

On the front page of Die Vaderland on 10 August 1956 are two photographs of black women at the demonstration holding white children on their laps. The headline is: "Weet hul ouers waar hulle is? [Do their parents know where they are?]" representing racial mixing as well as an anxiety about whether black women can be trusted as "nannies" to white children. Underlying the

highly emotive caption about the children "not knowing what they are doing here" and being "close to tears", is a pointed criticism of white mothers who leave their children in the inferior and dangerous charge of black women.

Although the photographs that appeared in Die Vaderland on both occasions show a majority of black women at the demonstration, most are represented only as a mass of Native women, the focus being on the white women who are pointed out and discussed individually. Behind the reported 'scandal' of white women involving themselves in the demonstrations is a more pointed inference about the role of these women. They are represented as furtive and sinister, suspiciously trying to conceal their identities and avoid Die Vaderland photographers at all costs. The caption to the photograph of two white women (one is wearing dark glasses, the other looks like Ray Alexander) seated in a group of seventeen other (black) women is headed "Sommige was bra skugter [Some were quite shy]". Referring only to the white women in the photograph, the caption continues:

"Toe die blanke vroue op hierdie foto om hulle name genader is, het hulle beslis geweier om dit te verstrek. 'n Blanke vrou wat veral skugter was vir die kamera het voortdurend met haar arm voor haar gesig geloop en eenkeer agter 'n sambreel saam met 'n naturellevrou geskuil om te voorkom dat 'n foto van haar geneem word. [When the white women in this photograph were approached for their names, they refused to give them. A white woman who was especially shy walked around with her arm in front of her face and at one time hid behind an umbrella with a Native woman to prevent her photo from being taken.]" [Die Vaderland 28/10/1955]



The third page report of the 9 August demonstration unequivocally suggests that white women were the leaders and agitators behind the demonstration; that their behaviour was furtive in order to conceal the central role they were playing as agitators; and that the naive black women who attended were mislead and manipulated by the white women. This page of Die Vaderland [appendix 4] shows that although it is nowhere directly stated that white women organised the demonstration and manipulated the mass of black women who attended, the juxtaposition of photographs, captions, headlines and first paragraph of the lead story combine to convey this impression.

Helen Joseph is identified as "the white woman with the dark glasses" carrying the black women's petitions into the Union Buildings, while the "blanke juffie [white missy]" in the other photograph is identified by her "defiant gaze" at the cameraman. According to the caption, she is making sure the black women sign their petitions, while the pen in her hand might even suggest that she may be signing the forms herself on their behalf.

The headline, "Lured here under false impression?" seems to speak for all the black women at the demonstration, as does the opening sentence "There is evidence that some of the Native women at the demonstration yesterday...". The report is actually about only two "Native servants" who allegedly reported to their white employer that they were told to wait at the Union Buildings for Prime Minister Strijdom to address them. Strijdom

is not mentioned by name in this paragraph about the two black women. Instead, the newspaper twice quotes the women referring to the president as the "grootbaas" and "baas", conveying political naiveté and submissiveness to white "baaskap" on the part of these typical black women at the demonstration. Their appearance at the demonstration is depicted in extraordinarily passive terms: they are two Native servants who "accidentally/by chance landed up at the demonstration" [Die Vaderland 10/8/1956].

The theme of white agitators being responsible for the women's anti-pass demonstrations is also prominent in the English-medium newspapers. In The Star [31/10/1958] a trial report of anti-pass demonstrators even mentions that, "The many white women, wearing dark glasses, who filled the gallery yesterday, were absent today." Furtive white women in dark glasses, then, are consistently represented as the active agents in the anti-pass campaigns, misleading and manipulating the black women, and they symbolise a hidden Communist puppeteer, pulling on the strings of Native women. The English commercial press specifically address their editorials about the demonstrations to the perceived threat of Communism:

"It may, of course, be true that the demonstrations in the last few days against the issue of reference books to Native women in Johannesburg have been instigated by agitators, including Communists." [The Star 29/10/1958]

"According to the Commissioner of Police, the demonstrations are Communist-inspired and indeed the likelihood is that troublemakers are busy behind the scenes. Unhappily this is the sort of situation, not uncommon in South Africa, which

affords opportunities for those who wish this country harm."  
[Rand Daily Mail 29/10/1958]

The lead story of the Rand Daily Mail on the 23 October 1958 [appendix 2] runs the headline, "Police blame Communists" and the subheadings, "'Stop agitators' appeal by Rademeyer" and "Cheers and jeers as 130 are arrested". Although written in the 'objective' style of a report, the newspaper's editorial position can be inferred from the prominence given to the opinion of the Police Commissioner, who is quoted extensively as an authoritative source. What is particularly interesting about this article is that while it ostensibly concerns "the demonstrations by African women", these women are not held responsible for their actions. Not only is the women's part in the demonstrations constructed passively: they were "incited by these people who want to cause trouble at any cost"; and "inspired" by "agitators", but they are depicted as having been misled against "their own interests" [Rand Daily Mail 23/10/1958].

The Afrikaans newspapers are suspicious in a more general way of whites involved in the demonstrations, the Bantu press, the foreign press and even the South African English press [Die Burger 10/9/1956; Die Vaderland]. What they have in common is that none of the white commercial newspapers depict the demonstrations as the independent mobilisation of thousands of black women inspired by their own anger and common rejection of pass laws. The 'Communist plot/ white agitators' theory serves to mask the agency of black women despite the overwhelming

evidence of their active defiance. This discursive practise draws the reader's attention away from the real issue of these demonstrations - the rejection of passes by black women - distracting one with the 'red herring' of Communist agitation.

At the level of common sense assumptions, the African women are also represented exclusively as being in the employment, and under the guardianship, of whites:

"And he appealed to African women and their employers to give the police any information they had about agitators... 'Let them go to the nearest police station and give us full particulars, or let them tell their employers who in turn could furnish us with the information.'" [Rand Daily Mail 23/10/1958]

The representation of the women demonstrators as "maids", "nannies" and "servants" of white employers appears in several of the texts and is contradicted by none of the texts sampled:

"Did their parents know that they had been taken along to the demonstration at the Union Buildings with their non-white nannies [nie-blanke oppasters]?" [Die Vaderland 10/8/1956]

"NO NANNIES TODAY: There was a rapid deterioration in the Johannesburg servant problem today when the Native women were arrested. As the women under arrest were being loaded into police vans some of them shouted: 'Tell our madams we won't be at work tomorrow.'" [The Star 21/10/1958]

"Annie, my African servant wants to be arrested. Do I take her to the pass office or will you fetch her?" [caption to a cartoon, appendix 3, Rand Daily Mail 29/10/1958]

This consistent representation of the women demonstrators as servants to whites is significant given that it was, in fact, completely opposite from the truth. Domestic servants were in fact the least radical women working in the urban areas and were among the first to accept passes due to the isolated and

insecure nature of their employment. The women who were most threatened by influx control and the regulation enabled by the issuing of passbooks were the self-employed women who made their living independently of whites, providing services in the African townships and from their own homes. It was these independent women who participated most actively in the FSAW demonstrations [Wells, 1993:131-132].

The Rand Daily Mail cartoon [appendix 4.1] presents, graphically, the stereotype of African womanhood from the perspective of white South Africans in 1958. The humour of the cartoon relies on the reader's perception of the absurdity and impossibility of such radical behaviour as defiance and voluntary arrest coming from the passive, simple, smiling 'maid' who is dependent on the white 'madam' to make all her arrangements. This visual text gives clear evidence of the discrepancy between the actions of women in the anti-pass demonstrations and the discursive construction of the "Native woman" that operates within most of the representation of these events by the white press.

Not only are African women depicted as dependent on their white employers, they are also depicted as being under the authority of male guardians. In several of the texts, attention is paid to the actions and opinions of the husbands and fathers of the women, in a way that would have no parallel if the demonstrators were men:

"Anxious husbands and fathers waited outside the court during the afternoon - willing to pay bail for their wives and daughters." [Rand Daily Mail 29/10/1958]

"SO FATHER COOKS THE PORRIDGE: With their wives in gaol, more than a thousand husbands in Johannesburg's townships have become housewives... The wife of an Orlando insurance agent is in gaol... So father cooks the porridge and slices the sandwiches for the children's lunch before he goes to work. He is typical of hundreds." [Rand Daily Mail 29/10/1958]

"Hundreds of armed police were on duty in Johannesburg last night. They expected a riot by the husbands of the 539 African women who were arrested yesterday." [Rand Daily Mail 22/10/1958]

This is also a significant discursive feature, given the facts that many urbanised African women were supporting themselves independently of both marital and familial guardianship [Wells, 1993:88-91].

Several of the reports that appear in the liberal newspapers portray the women's demonstrations from a sympathetic angle. These reports tend to depict the demonstrators as non-threatening by emphasising their 'feminine' traits. The gathering at the Union Buildings on the 9 August 1956, for example, is described as something of ladies' picnic, with emphasis on the bright and varied clothing of the women and the festive atmosphere, rather than on the actual purpose of the demonstration:

"Native women from many parts of the Union, some in tribal dress, some in smart European clothes and carrying vanity cases, massed on the lower terraces... The gathering had a picnic air as women opened flasks of tea and ate sandwiches and biscuits. There were many children, and here and there a baby was being fed under the shade of the pine trees. The leaders of the women stood out in green blouses, and there were gay splashes of colour from a few in tribal dress... Native, Indian and Coloured women walked from the Native bus terminus in the centre of Pretoria in small groups, carrying attaché cases, shopping bags, brown paper parcels with food, coats and sunshades." [The Star 9/8/1956]

In this instance, the editorial avoids dealing with the issues that provoked the demonstration on the pretence of being 'unbiased'. However, by failing to recount the reasons for the protest and at the same time hinting that it would have been the women to blame if the demonstration had harmed political stability and race relations, the women are positioned as the objects of the text whose behaviour is to be monitored, rather than as being subjects giving voice to their political views and demands.

When the reports do side with the women and against the authorities, the women are represented as weak and passive victims of injustice. For example, the trial of arrested women protesters in 1958 is reported as "Weary women say 'no' to bail": "The last weary procession of African women - some still carrying their babies - shuffled before the magistrate in a Johannesburg court at 10.20 last night" [Rand Daily Mail 29/10/1958]. Once again, the women are portrayed sympathetically, but also as quite the opposite of angry, strong and defiant.

To conclude this section, it can be stated that whether the content of the reports in the white commercial press is aggressively hostile or non-committantly sympathetic, the underlying discourse that is common to these reports obscures and undermines the political voice of the women by representing them as dependent, passive, unthreatening, politically naive and incapable of organising themselves.

### 5.1.2 The Black Press - Drum Magazine:

In Women and Resistance in South Africa, Cherryl Walker characterises Drum as "a mirror of sexist attitudes... its treatment of women was generally frivolous, stereotyping women as beauty queens, cover girls and social ornaments" [Walker, 1982:149]. In 1954, the magazine asked its readership, "Should women have equal rights with men?", to which it received 101 negative replies to 58 positive. The position of Drum and of the majority of its readership is reflected in the reply that won the prize for best letter:

"Let us give them courtesy but no rights. They should continue to carry no passes for they are harmlessly inferior; put on their bonnets everywhere, for it is a shame for women to go bareheaded." [Drum May 1954 quoted in Walker, 1982:149]

Besides the stereotype of glamorous young women portrayed as sex objects, the magazine also represented the essence of African womanhood in the glorified image of the township housewife and mother, for example, in the picture-story "And She's only a Housewife" discussed in Chapter 2 [Drum, September 1958:55].

These two elements of patriarchal discourse: the representation of woman as attractive object of the male gaze and of her natural affiliation to the domestic sphere, feature in articles about the ANC and the women's anti-pass demonstrations. Drum tends to fixate on the women's appearance



rather than their opinions and seek out "what the men say about it" [Drum, May 1958]. For example, Drum asks Chief Luthuli about the rise of women's protests and quotes him as saying "I cannot visualise a situation in which the movement will be overwhelmingly feminine" [Drum, June 1958].

An article about new leadership in the ANC published photographs and biographical captions about sixteen of the 'new faces' in the organisation [Drum, March 1955:24-25]. Although two of the people featured are women, the text runs as follows:

"As Sophiatown move proceeds, younger men come forward in place of banned leaders.

During the last year, over forty Congress leaders have been banned... under the Suppression of Communism Act. Who are the people who are taking their place, and what sort of people are they? On these two pages DRUM shows some of the new men that have recently come into the limelight.

African women, too, are appearing more and more at Congress meetings... Women have begun wearing clothes, umbrellas and handbags decorated with the Congress colours - orange, green and black." [Drum, March 1955:24]

In these two paragraphs the representation of men and women in the ANC is quite distinct. Drum focuses on each of the "new men" as individuals engaged in the action of taking up leadership in the place of banned Congress leaders. By contrast, the new women recruits to the ANC are not singled out for comment, but mentioned merely as "African women". The women are not represented according to their actions within the organisation, but in passive terms, according to their appearance - they display ANC colours in their clothing.

As regards the two women whose photographs appear amongst those of the "new men" to hold office in the ANC, what they

actually do in the ANC is not the main focus of attention. Compare the first three captions to the last two of the following captions:

"JOHN NKADIMENG: Little fighting [sic] trade unionist on the Tvl executive, finds violent trade unionism in hostels; confident but no dreamer.

"STEPHEN DLAMINI: Durban factory trade unionist, member of the secretariat, with more of the fighter about him than meets the eye.

"OBED MOTSHABI: Typical new blood; secretary, south-western region. Steady but suspicious; outwardly shy, but tough to manage.

"LINDIWE NGAKANE: Pretty social science student at Wits. A gifted speaker and notorious experiementalist in cake-baking at home."

"MATILDA NKOPO: Dreamy secretary, western branch of Women's League; makes sure her husband's stomach is full before campaigning." [Drum, March 1955:24]

Although Lindiwe Ngakane and Matilda Nkopo appear amongst the "new men", conveying that they are also part of the 'new blood' within Congress leadership, the two women are represented from an entirely different frame of reference to that which applies to the men: that of their physical appearance and domestic capabilities.

The report of an ANC Congress in February 1956 represents the women delegates in a similarly passive and trivialised way by focusing on their clothing. The photograph of the ANC Women's League Executive is captioned:

"FASHION LEADERS, the Executive of the ANC Women's League, are: Mrs Lilian Ngoyi (President), Mrs M. Molefi (Durban), Miss F. Mkize (Durban), Mrs V. Gqirana (P.E.), Mrs C.A.N. Kuse (Queenstown), Mrs Fances Baard (P.E.). Is it high policy or spicy gossip?" [Drum, February 1958:21]

One of the subheadings of the same article is, "The women brought gay, new fashions to the ANC congress - and also bright, new political ideas!" The power the women in the photograph have as leaders of the ANC Women's League is undermined by the caption "Fashion Leaders". The term suggests that the leadership these women possess is in the (feminine, trivial) field of fashion and not in the field of political power. Their main contribution to the ANC is the attractiveness of their appearance, while their "bright, new political ideas" are of secondary importance. The value of their political ideas is brought into question by the suggestion that their discussion is nothing more than women's "gossip" rather than (political) "high policy".

A report of the Zeerust uprising by women against passes carries the headline: "Zeerust: The Women's Battle" [Drum, May 1958:22]. Strangely, however, the reasons for the uprising are discussed without any direct reference to the position or views of the women. Rather, the second page is headed: "Zeerust: What the Men say about it" and features the photographs of three men accompanied by captions giving their name and quoting their opinion. An extract of the article reads:

"On the whole, the men refugees in Bechuanaland, sympathetic to the women's resistance to the passes, were, however, more concerned with the break-up of the tribe... One pungently [sic] declared: 'If my wife no more belongs to me, let the Government pay me back my lobola and have her.'" [Drum, May 1958:25].

Drum tends to describe the women's demonstrations against passes as a remarkable spectacle, for example, in the article titled "Meek Women Talk Back!" [Drum, November 1957]. This headline and the opening paragraph presents the political conscientisation of Zulu women in Natal according to the patriarchal construction of the insubordinate 'shrewish' women who are challenging male authority by taking their own political action against passes:

"Zulu women who always used to go around with their heads covered, saying "Yes" to their men all the time and waiting meekly for someone else to talk up for them, are wagging their own tongues now, acting for themselves. They are becoming politically conscious, too." [Drum, November 1957:32]

The conclusion that may be drawn from the analysis of the Drum texts is that patriarchal ideology is as much in evidence in the black commercial press representations of FSAW, if not more so, as it is in those of the white commercial newspapers. While on the explicit level the Drum articles support the political position of the women's anti-pass campaign, the underlying discursive features within these texts disempower the women protesters while asserting the authority of African men.

## 5.2 Self-Conception - 'mothers' and 'a rock':

### 5.2.1 New Age and Fighting Talk:

In contrast to the male subject position constructed in the Drum texts ["What the Men say about it" Drum May 1958:22], the articles published in New Age and Fighting Talk represent the position of the women themselves. This is literally the case in the articles written by FSAW leaders, Helen Joseph ["Women against Passes" Fighting Talk January 1956:3] and Phyllis Altman ["Daughters of 1919" Fighting Talk September 1956:7] and the lead story of New Age [24/11/1955] that quotes verbatim a speech by Lilian Ngoyi.

Another way of demonstrating that the New Age and Fighting Talk texts represent the women's viewpoint, that is, African women affected by the pass law in general as well as the FSAW women specifically, is to analyse the grammatical structure of all the headlines about the anti-pass campaign. The following lists the 18 headlines covering the issue of passes for women as well as the FSAW campaign that appeared in New Age and Fighting Talk from 1955-1959. When the noun "women" appears in the headline its grammatical position as subject [subj] or object [obj] of the sentence is stated, excepting when it appears as adjective to the noun "passes" (i.e. "passes for women"):

1. "Countrywide Campaign against Passes for Women: 'We shall Defeat the Government'" [New Age 24/11/1955]

2. "Women [subj] against Passes [obj]" [FT Jan. 1956]
3. "Will we [subj] see African Women [obj] marched off to jail like this?" [New Age 6/1/1956]
4. "Passes for Women to start in Winburg: But Nats expect resistance" [New Age 6/1/1956]
5. "Pass laws will bring hardships to women [obj]" [New Age 19/1/1956]
6. "Women [subj] don't want to carry passes [obj]" [New Age 19/1/1956]
7. "Passbooks for women issued in Winburg" [New Age 22/3/1956]
8. "'Oppose all passes' urge Women's Leaders [subj]" [New Age 22/3/1956]
9. "'No pensions unless you show your passbook' New intimidation of Winberg Women [obj]" [New Age 17/5/1956]
10. "'Strijdom, You Have Struck a Rock': 20 000 Women [subj] say 'No' to passes [obj]" [New Age 16/8/1956]
11. "The women [subj] want an answer [obj]" [New Age 16/8/1956]
12. "Women [subj] have said 'No'!" [New Age 16/8/1956]
13. "'Passes are as bad as lashes'" [New Age 16/8/1956]
14. "700 Women [subj] protest in Cradock" [New Age 23/8/1956]
15. "ANC calls on Men [obj] to join anti-pass campaign" [New Age 23/8/1956]
16. "Daughters of 1919" [FT Sept. 1956]
17. "African women [subj] against Passes [obj]" [FT June 1957]
18. "Natal women [subj] protest" [FT Sept. 1959]

It is significant that of the eighteen headlines, five quote the women directly [1,8,10,12,13]. Twelve of the eighteen headlines (60%) have women as the subject, while three of the eighteen (15%) have women as the object.

By placing the women as the subject of the sentence, the newspaper aligns itself with their point of view, or 'speaks from' the position of the women. On the other hand, placing the women as object of the sentence, for example, in the headline "Will we [subj] see African women [obj] marched off to jail like this?" situates the newspaper/readership "we" at a certain distance from the African women "they". This distance is maintained in the Drum texts, for example, "Will our [possessive pronoun] women [obj] carry passes?" [Drum Jan. 1956] and "The Battle of the Women [obj]" [Drum December 1958].

The positioning of the women as the subject of these texts is in opposition to patriarchal discourse that constructs women as its object. Furthermore, the content of the texts represents the protesting women as active, vocal and defiant, contrary to the representation of the women as passive victims, suffering hardships and indignities on account of the pass laws - the type of patriarchal discourse one encounters in the white and black commercial press.

An example is the cover page of the September 1959 issue of Fighting Talk [appendix 4.2]. The cover juxtaposes two photographs, one of Lilian Ngoyi addressing a FSAW protest meeting and the other of women running with knobkerries, taken during the Beerhall unrest at Cato Manor, Natal, in June 1959 [see Walker, 1982:231]. They bear the captions, "Women in Conference" and "Women in Action", creating an impression of the African women, on the one hand, as politically active and

eloquent, and on the other, as physically strong and militantly defiant.

In terms of the level of discourse, one could conclude that these texts provided an implicit contestation to the dominant patriarchal construction of African women in South Africa at this time.

### 5.2.2 FSAW texts:

The Federation of South African Women did not have their own equivalent to Sash journal, having to rely on the Congress Alliance publications, cited above, to publicise their views and activities. The organisation did publish several pamphlets, however, including the twelve page anti-pass booklet, Women in Chains [1956], and the eight page commemoration of the Pretoria demonstration, "Strijdom... You have struck a rock" [1956].

In the Women's Charter and other formal documents of the Federation, the women's action is represented as a "two-pronged struggle":

"As members of the National Liberatory movements and Trade Unions, in and through our various organisations, we march forward with our men in the struggle for liberation and the defence of the working people... As women there rests upon us also the burden of removing from our society all the social differences developed in past times between men and women, which have the effects of keeping our sex in a position of inferiority and subordination."

The self-representation of FSAW is, therefore, simultaneously an assertion of women's commitment to stand side by side men in



the struggle for National Liberation and rights for all; as well as of the intention to fight for women's liberation and rights from within the broader movement. If one contrasts this conception of FSAW's role and identity to that of ANC President-General at the time, Chief Albert Luthuli, one reveals a discrepancy on the point of the feminist part of FSAW's agenda.

In his "Message to South African Women" given on the 9 August 1959, Luthuli represents the women's role as that of junior partners to men in the National Liberation Struggle, with no reference made to women's rights. Luthuli "paid tribute" to the women for:

"pairing effectively with their menfolk. At times they seem a length ahead of men. This is all for the good because coldness on the part of women discourages men to the point of lukewarmness."

Later in the speech he said, "Women are putting men's traditional dignity and so-called superiority in jeopardy. Do African men of our day want to play second fiddle to women?"

Within their political home of the Congress Alliance, then, the women of FSAW had to struggle for their identity against the constraint of patriarchal discourse that would construct women as the subordinate and altruistic helpmates of men. One cannot reduce this discursive struggle to a simple conflict between FSAW and the male-dominated structures of the Congress, however, for the women's voice was also kept in check by the common sense assumptions of the dominant discourse. This is evident in the following two texts.

### "A Call to all Mothers":

One of the first FSAW documents to be issued to the public, "A Call to all Mothers", aimed to mobilise women to attend the Congress of Mothers held in Johannesburg on the 7 August 1955. The agenda for discussion at the Congress is stated in the pamphlet as follows:

- "What women can do to help carry out the Freedom Charter adopted at the Congress of the People.
- How we can campaign particularly for those sections of the Charter that call for 'Houses, Security and Comfort!' and 'The Doors of learning and Culture shall be Opened!'
- How women of South Africa can help to preserve peace, to prevent the fearful and useless destruction of human life in war.
- How we women can strengthen and build our organisations and win recognition of our right to equal treatment and rights as human beings; how we can do away with laws and customs that keep women as inferiors." [FSAW, August 1955]

In contrast to the feminist aspects of the final point on this agenda is the way in which the appeal to women to attend is made. The words "women" and "mothers" are used interchangeably throughout the pamphlet. It begins with the heading, "What is the first thing a mother thinks of?" Below this is the reply:

"The answer is simple - a mother's first concern is for her child or children. She wants her children to have good food, proper clothes, a pleasant home; to be educated; to have opportunities for happiness and development. No mother will rest content until she has won these things for her children."

This opening statement situates women within the domestic role of caring for children and making "a pleasant home". That this must be every woman's primary concern is common sense, the

preconstructed element of this text. The next paragraph shifts the emphasis away from the home, however, and the word, "women" now replaces "mother":

"The time when women sat at home and wept or wished for better things for their children has long since passed. Women are now in the forefront of the fight in our country for a better life for all, particularly for our children... No people can win freedom while the women are kept back. No people can win happiness while the women are prevented from playing their part."

But then comes the justificatory statement:

"Our children's future depends on the extent to which we, the mothers of South Africa, organise and work and fight for a better life for our little ones."

This discursive tension between patriarchal assumptions and feminist assertions is the same as that which occurs in the texts of the Black Sash. On the one hand, this text justifies the entry of women into the public domain, in FSAW's case, the freedom struggle. On the other hand, the entry of women into politics is justified in terms of women's primary duty as mothers to their children - the justificatory structure of the discourse of public man/ private woman.

Although this text contests the patriarchal assertion that 'women have no place in politics', in Pêcheux's terminology it amounts to 'counter-identification' rather than a complete 'dis-identification' from patriarchal discourse. These discursive tensions are most visible in the final paragraph:

"We call on every mother, every woman, to come to the Congress of Mothers. No woman will be debarred from attending. Every woman who has the future of her children, of the children of South Africa, at heart, is invited to attend this meeting."

It is ironic that the women are urged to attend this political meeting to discuss, among other items, how to do away with laws and customs that "keep women as inferiors", yet at the same time they must do so on no other basis than that of their commitment to the maternal role.

### **"Women against Passes":**

The political mobilisation of women on the basis of women's primary duty as mothers is also a central theme of this article by Helen Joseph [Fighting Talk, January 1956]. In her account of the October 1955 demonstration at the Union Buildings, Joseph includes an extended quotation from the document presented to the Government:

"We speak from our hearts as mothers, as women. Life cannot be stopped. We must love and marry and find a home. We must bear children in hope and in pain; we must love them as part of ourselves, we must help them to grow, we must endure all the longings and sufferings of motherhood. Because of this we are made strong, to come here, to speak for our children, to strive for their future.

We, the voters and the voteless, call upon you... to hearken to the protest of the women, for we shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice and security."

This passage begins by recounting what is assumed to be the 'natural' trajectory of women's lives, including marriage, setting up house and bearing children. It is interesting that these rites of passage for women are expressed as imperative, that women *must* marry, bear children and become caring mothers.

This role of mother is a position of strength, though, which imbues the women with the authority to make their public protest.

This text, then, may also be considered to be in counter-identification to patriarchal discourse, for although it contains the preconstructed assumption that women's primary role is motherhood, it inverts the relatively powerless, domestic figure of mother to represent motherhood as a source of authority and power in the domain of politics.

### **Conclusions:**

Much has been written about this discourse of 'motherhood' which pervades the self-representation of FSAW women to the extent that the words 'mother' and 'women' are used interchangeably in many of the texts. Women's common experience of motherhood is used to unite and mobilise women from different backgrounds, for example, in the following extract:

"The task of the [FSAW] is to unite women of all races, of all organisations, to bring them together as women, as mothers, for the great unifying force among women is not so much their womanhood as their motherhood." [FSAW archive, 9/1957]

Several writers, including Wells, Hassim and Gaitskill, have concluded from the prevalence of the motherhood discourse that, ultimately, FSAW was conservative on the matter of women's liberation and reinforced the patriarchal construction of the domestic as women's fundamental and original sphere.

Wells defines the phenomenon as "motherism", being:

"...a women's politics of resistance [which] affirms obligations traditionally assigned to women and calls on the community to respect them... Motherism is clearly not feminism. Women swept up in motherist movements are not fighting for their own personal rights as women, but for their rights as mothers." [Wells quoted in Walker, 1982:xix]

While Wells is correct in making the distinction between the motherhood discourse and conscious feminism, it is not correct to conclude that 'motherism' is essentially conservative or that it unambiguously reinforces patriarchal ideology. For, as has been shown by the texts analysed above, the social status afforded to mothers by patriarchal discourses (particularly by indigenous patriarchal discourse) is appropriated by the women to be used as a position of authority from which they may legitimately speak out in the public, political domain. The logic of FSAW's self-representation is essentially the same as that of the Black Sash: that women have a place in politics as mothers 'safeguarding the future of their children'. This is different from the patriarchal discourse that 'women's place is in the home and not in politics'.

Walker takes the opposite line of argument to Wells, relating the FSAW women's conception of the mother as a strong, assertive figure to the precolonial notions of motherhood:

"the women of FSAW had an essentially positive understanding of the value and power of motherhood, at least partly rooted in their own experience of it and sanctioned by the past, and... in defending this they were defending their gendered interests, rather than patriarchy as such." [Walker, 1982:xxii]

That the FSAW women drew on traditional African conceptions of motherhood to contest the contemporary construction of women as passive, domestic figures who had no authority on public matters makes a great deal of sense. Jeff Guy also argues that the foundations of African women's resistance in the twentieth century "will be found in southern Africa's precapitalist societies, where women's labour and women's fertility... provided the bedrock upon which these societies were built" [Guy in Walker, 1990:47]. The problem with Walker's argument, however, is that it assumes that the FSAW women had conscious control over their self-representation as mothers and that there is a straightforward relation between their self-representation and their "gender interests".

Walker's analysis, like that of Wells, remains at the level of conscious articulation and fails to consider the effect that contemporary 'common sense' patriarchal assumptions would have had in shaping the FSAW women's self-conception. The FSAW discourse of motherhood is neither a conservative legitimization of patriarchy nor an explicit feminist contestation of patriarchy. Rather it is an ambivalent discourse, simultaneously constraining and empowering the women in various ways, that emerges from the tension between their need to be politically active and their common sense assumptions about women's role, preconstructed by the dominant patriarchal discourse of the 1950s.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation began by questioning the historical approach that draws a sharp distinction between a 'women's movement' and a 'feminist movement' on the basis of whether the women members possess 'feminist consciousness' or not. It has been shown that there are different levels of gender struggle, including the level of discourse, which exists as a different terrain of struggle to that of the level of events and explicit conflicts. While relations of power are maintained by coercion on the explicit level, power struggles at the level of discourse involve the "mobilisation of meaning" to sustain or contest the dominant understanding of particular topics, in this case, the role and 'nature' of women in South African society.

The problem with relying exclusively on the explicit level of conscious articulation to provide the authentic 'voice' of women living in a patriarchal society is expressed by Dorothy Driver in the following quotation:

"... the difficulty about one's 'own voice', which proceeds from the anxiety that one's 'own voice' is not readily available to a woman pushed and pulled into shape not only by varieties of patriarchal decree but also by a set of rigidly enforced political and ideological polarisations... [is] does one know when women are speaking in their 'own voices' rather than speaking from assigned subject-positions?" [Driver, 1991:89]

Although the women's political organisations of the 1950s, the Black Sash and the Federation of South African Women, did not consciously mobilise women against patriarchal domination, there



is evidence of a gender struggle being waged at the level of discourse within textual representations of the organisations. This struggle is provoked by the action of both groups of women entering the traditionally male domain of public politics, and it centres around defining whether and what place women have in this public sphere. It is the complexity of the emerging 'voice' of women in South African politics that has been explored in this study of these two organisations.

It has been shown that despite there being significant differences between the social base, the campaigns and the views of the two organisations, they produced discourses that were similar, in form and content, in their contestation of the patriarchal discourse that 'women's place is in the home, and not in politics'. These emergent contestatory discourses are evident in the organisations' self-representation in texts, including cartoons and articles in Sash magazine, letters to the press by members such as May Bell, the silent protesting practise of 'public hauntings' of politicians by the Black Sash women, articles by and about FSAW in Fighting Talk and New Age, and in the pamphlets and manifestos produced by FSAW.

A foil to these texts of self-representation, are the ways in which the organisations were represented by outside observers, particularly by the South African press. In the case of the Black Sash, the Afrikaans, NP-supporting newspapers showed their opposition to the organisation, not by criticising its political agenda (the campaign against the Senate Act), but by dismissing

Communist agitators", by whose action the usually passive, apolitical African women had been misled.

In a different way, the politically supportive black commercial press also managed to efface the agency of the women protesters, by representing them according to various constructions of patriarchal discourse. Drum magazine consistently portrayed FSAW and other politicised African women as the objects rather than the subjects of its articles. Their political views were generally not sought out in favour of giving a male point of view, while much attention was focused on the women's appearance.

In the self-representations of the Black Sash and FSAW, one encounters two ambivalent discourses that justify the women's political intervention in terms of the figures of 'moral guardian' and 'mother'. Both figures are strong and assertive, in contrast to the passive patriarchal images of the 'angel of the home' and the domesticated mother. They both assert women's legitimate presence in the public domain of politics, however, this legitimacy is derived directly from the presumed primary role of women as defenders of the home and family.

One can conclude that the dominant patriarchal discourses that constructed women's role as 'in the home and not in politics' acted as both an external and an internalised constraint on the FSAW and Black Sash women's self-conception as political activists. The subsequent tensions that arose within the self-representation of these organisations has been explored, and it

is concluded that 'feminist consciousness' cannot be regarded as a fully developed resource that women's organisations either have or do not have, this being a measure of the conservatism, or lack thereof, of the organisation.

Contestatory conceptions of women's role in politics develop unevenly and in antagonistic relation to existing dominant patriarchal discourses. The history of women's political organisations like the Black Sash and the Federation of South African Women is, among other things, the history of women's struggle to find their 'voice' in South African politics.

1.1

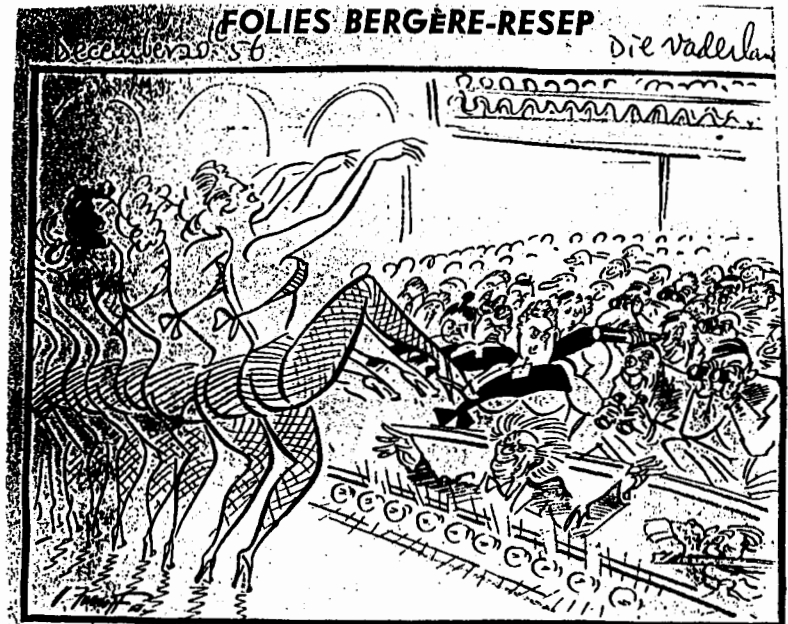


1.3

POT WORD GESTOOK!  
[THE POT IS BEING STOKED WITH PROVOCATION]



1.2



BLACK SASH: Laet ek  
kyk. Ons seek na wonke om  
ons 'n bietjie aantrekliker vir  
die kiesers te maak.

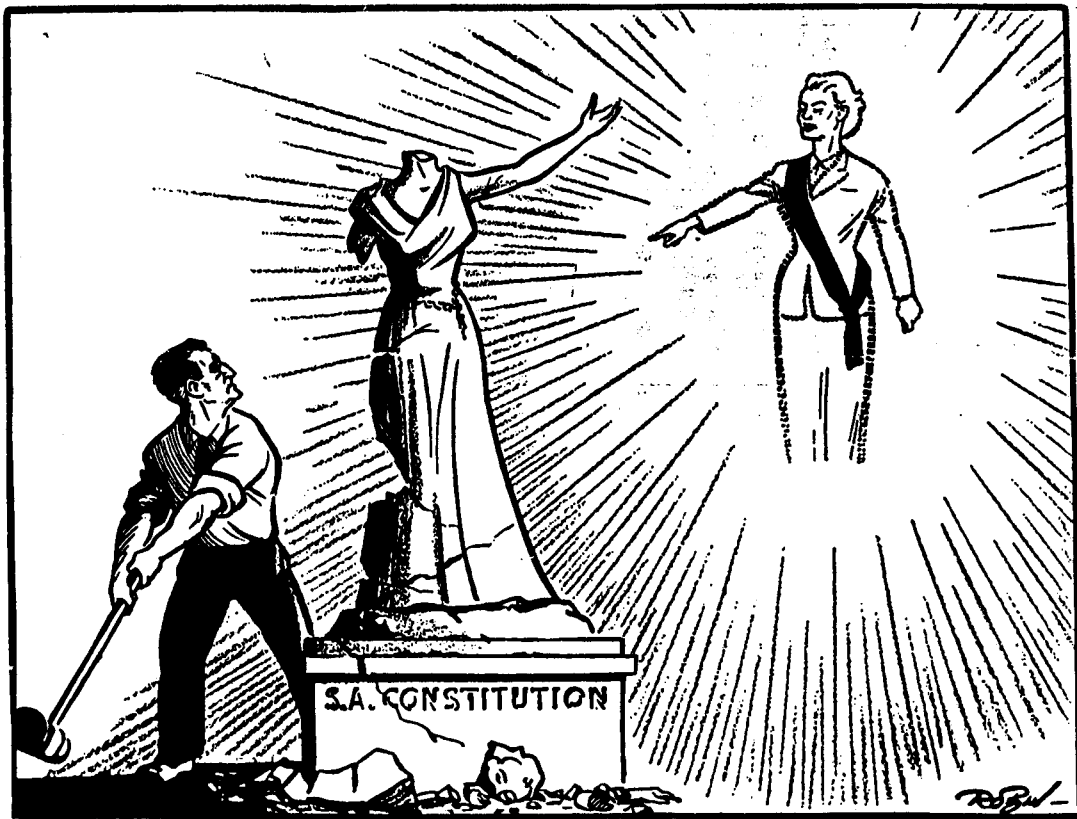
1.4

AS DIE TRANSVALER SAW IT

**U.P. CINEMA**  
PRESENTS  
**THE COUNTRYWIDE  
SHOW OF SHOWS**  
A CRYING COMEDY  
*The Fanciful  
Follies*  
IN  
**OH, WHAT A DUTIFUL MOURNING**  
SEE THE SASHBUCKLING LADIES DEMONSTRATE  
HOW  
**MOURNING BECOMES MOCKERY**  
A UNIQUE PARADE OF POLITICAL COQUETRY!  
"ROU-STRIKKIES" FREE —  
BUT BRING SAKDOEK & TEARS  
**FOR THE WAIL OF THE YEARS!**

2.2

# THE SPIRIT REMAINS



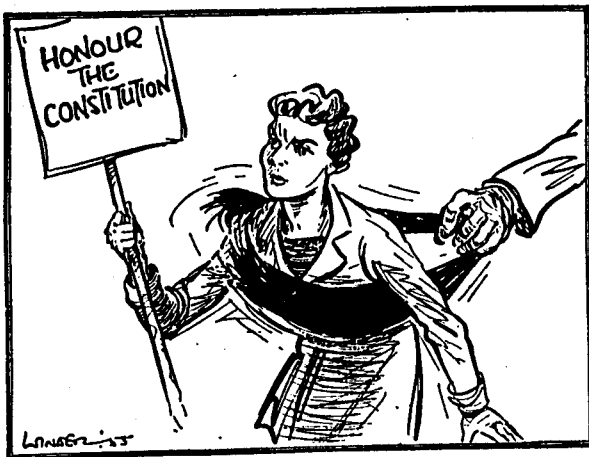
By courtesy of Robin, cartoonist to the Natal Mercury

2.3

# THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE

2.1

"NOTHING SHALL DETER US"



By courtesy of Windes, cartoonist to the Sunday Times



By courtesy of Robin, cartoonist to the Natal Mercury

3.1



3.2



Die Swart Serp, November '56

3.3



4.1

**Breakfast quip**



CONVULS

"Annie, my African servant, wants to be arrested. Do I take her to the pass office or will you fetch her?"

4.2

# FIGHTING TALK

Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper. S. 4934

Vol. 13, No. 7. Price 6d.

SEPTEMBER, 1959



1ST 9 PROTES OF 2  
WOMEN PRE

## OMEN ALLO

WOMEN IN CONFERENCE

## THE UNITED PARTY SPLIT AND THE PROGRESSIVES

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## NATAL WOMEN PROTEST

THE INSIDE STORY  
by Joe Matthews

## NYASALAND:

### The Devlin Commission

by L. Bernstein

\*\*\*

hort Story:

### 'THE PASS AND THE HOME-GIRL'

\*\*\*

SCIENCE ARTICLE  
by Dr. Edward Ross



WOMEN IN ACTION

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